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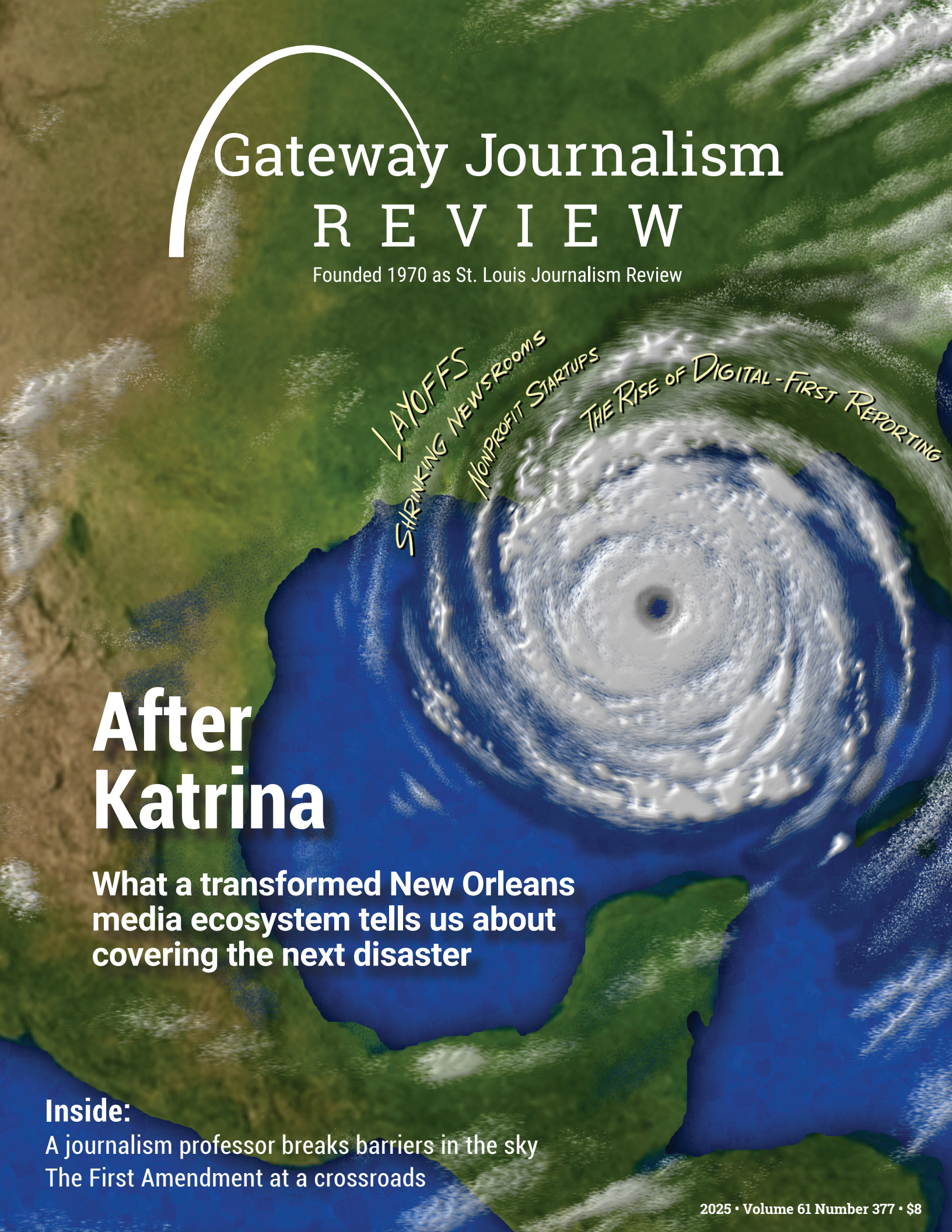

After Katrina

What a transformed New Orleans media ecosystem tells us about covering the next disaster

Inside:

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Courtesy of Lisa Frazier Page

The Storytellers' Stories: How this project came to be

By Lisa Frazier Page

I was a Louisiana transplant, working as a journalist in the nation's capital in late August 2005, when Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed the city that I love. I longed for home.

The reporter in me wanted to be in New Orleans, covering the heartbreaking disaster with my former co-workers of The Times-Picayune, where I'd spent the first 10 years of my career, mostly as a reporter and then a Metro Page columnist. But as a mom of two toddlers and a preschooler (ages two, three and four) with no close relatives in town, I knew that leaving them indefinitely with my husband was not a viable option. So, like the rest of the world, I watched helplessly as the tragedy unfolded daily in the news pages and on the television screen.

Fast forward 20 years. I'm back home, working as a professional-in-residence at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication. The students in my capstone print reporting class are about the age of my youngest child — too young to remember Hurricane Katrina firsthand.

None of my children, now 22, 23 and 24 years old, have firsthand memories of Hurricane Katrina. They don't remember our tears or the frantic, unsuccessful calls, trying to check on their father's family members who had evacuated New Orleans, and my family, who all remained in Bogalusa, a small Louisiana city about 69 miles north of New Orleans. Cell phones and even some landlines were all out. My children's most vivid memories of Hurricane Katrina were shaped by our family conversations. They've grown up hearing us talk about how their paternal grandparents and aunt rebuilt their homes in New Orleans East, homes that were swamped by floodwaters when the levees were breached. They've heard stories about the interesting few months when their father's aunt, who is also his godmother, came to stay with us in Maryland as she awaited word about the fate of her home. As it turned out, her house, located not far from the French Quarter, remained high and dry.

I figured that a few of my students from the New Orleans area grew up hearing similar stories and that Hurricane Katrina was even more remote for the others. But for all of them, Hurricane Katrina was as distant a memory as Hurricane Betsy, the other big storm that devastated New Orleans in September 1965, had been to me, growing up.

With the 20th anniversary approaching, I wondered how I could make Hurricane Katrina more vivid, more real to my students and connect them to the sterling journalism that my former Times-Picayune colleagues had produced under excruciating circumstances. They had won Pulitzer Prizes for breaking news coverage and public service for their work.

I'd read isolated accounts of some individual stories here and there. But what if we tracked down enough Times-Picayune journalists — people now scattered in various jobs — so that each student could interview and write a profile of someone who had contributed to the paper's coverage while living through the disaster? Would these journalists, who are trained not to become the story, be willing to share what was going on in their personal lives as they helped to tell the world about Hurricane Katrina? Would these emerging young journalists be interested in hearing such stories?

Those questions developed into our capstone class project, "The Storytellers' Stories: Hurricane Katrina 20 Years Later." I will be forever grateful that nearly everyone we contacted not only responded to my initial email but also agreed to tell their stories.

As it turns out, my students wanted to hear the stories. But even more importantly, in an age where they regularly see journalists belittled by authorities in high places and hear constant claims of "fake news," they needed to hear them.

They needed to hear about the dedication of these journalists — reporters and photographers on the ground in New Orleans or with evacuees in Houston, editors setting up on-the-spot newsrooms in other cities and shifting almost overnight to a digital platform and editorial writers speaking for a devastated, depleted city. Journalists dedicated to telling the truth. All while dealing with the losses of their own homes and belongings, long separations from their loved ones and great uncertainty — sometimes great anxiety — about their futures.

The stories are powerful. And so are the lessons they taught my students.

Courtesy of Michael Perlstein

David Meeks, a sports editor at the Times-Picayune who oversaw the reporting team that stayed in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit, hands out the first printed papers at the Superdome on Sept. 2, 2005.

Local news defined the Katrina story in New Orleans. Could it still do that today?

By Jackie Spinner

When Hurricane Katrina made landfall on Aug. 29, 2005, the newsrooms in New Orleans became lifelines for scattered residents. Reporters and photographers from The Times-Picayune spread out across the flooded city. Even after the paper's headquarters was evacuated, coverage continued, first online, and then, three days later, in print from borrowed presses in Houma, Louisiana, about 55 miles away.

Meanwhile, WWL-AM had reporters and anchors embedded in emergency operations centers. Every radio station in New Orleans broadcast its signal. WWL-TV likewise never went off the air, the only station in the city to do so.

But that model of local crisis coverage, born in the age of print dominance and a few powerful well-staffed broadcast outlets, may no longer be possible.

"It would be a huge challenge to cover Katrina the way we did," said Dave Cohen, who has been news director for WWL Radio since 2000. "There are just not nearly the numbers there were 20 years ago."

The WWL-AM newsroom had 15 people during Katrina, for example. Now it has five.

"Not only did we have a relatively large staff, but we called on resources from corporate holdings around the country to help cover Katrina's arrival and aftermath," Cohen said. "But today, newsrooms are not what they used to be on any level, from print to television to radio."

In 2021, the Pew Research Center estimated that U.S. newsrooms lost 26% of their jobs from 2008 and 2020. Newspaper newsrooms saw the biggest cuts,with employment falling by 57% That number has likely grown even bigger in the past five years.

In 2005, the Times-Picayune was at the center of New Orleans media. Legacy outlets, such as The Louisiana Weekly, Gambit Weekly, CityBusiness, the Clarion Herald and a handful of other community papers orbited around it.

Twenty years later, the Picayune no longer exists as an independent paper, having merged with The Advocate in 2019. The local media ecosystem is now populated by nonprofits such as Verite News, The Lens and the Louisiana Illuminator, alongside hyperlocal newsletters and neighborhood sites.

Continued on next page

> **"Unfortunately we are in a space where we no longer have infinite resources and infinite talent. We don't have the amount of people we once had. We don't have the people to shoot the kinds of stories you've seen me cover."**
>
> **— Charisse Gibson**

"I think people relied on the big newspapers to give them information in 2005," said Terry Baquet, editor-in-chief of Verite News, a nonprofit outlet launched in 2022. "People no longer rely on newspapers."

For Baquet, who was Page 1 Editor at the Times-Picayune in 2005, Katrina was the shift.

"Katrina sort of foretold the demise of newspapers," he said.

The Times-Picayune's coverage earned two Pulitzer Prizes — one for breaking news and another for public service, shared with the Sun Herald in Gulfport, Mississippi. It also revealed the growing power of the internet.

In the city itself, the printed paper was gold, with stranded residents at the Superdome and Ernest N. Morial Convention Centersharing limited copies delivered by reporters and editors. "You would have thought we were handing out pizzas or Po Boys because people were grabbing for these papers to try to find out what was going on," Baquet recalled.

But for residents who had evacuated, the printed paper was of little help. The paper made the transition in real time, prioritizing its breaking news coverage online and finding ways to engage residents who had evacuated to places all over the country. "The only way you could find out what happened to your family was through people contacting each other on Facebook," Baquet said. "We set up this sort of page or list where you could find people. It revealed the greatness of the Internet and how helpful it could be in situations like that. We were still putting out newspapers, but the newspaper would come out the next day, and people were trying to find out information about their families. They could get it in real time."

In addition to the Internet, the role of social media has significantly changed how journalists distribute and how people consume local news, particularly in a disaster.

Social media gave Hurricane Ida coverage a dimension Katrina never had, allowing viewers to ask questions directly or send video from neighborhoods reporters couldn't reach.

"What really helped us was the use of social media," said Charisse Gibson, who grew up in New Orleans and joined WWL-TV as an anchor in 2019. "TV wasn't always accessible. Using social media helped to get the word out."

Ida made landfall in 2021 on the very same day that Katrina had, Aug. 29.

WWL-TV staff camped inside their newsroom, sleeping on air mattresses on the floor in the sales department and working 12-hour shifts. A security guard cooked their meals with food staffers had brought from their abandoned refrigerators at home.

"We did that for days," recalled Gibson, president of the NABJ chapter in New Orleans. "The hard part about it was — it was the same situation as Katrina — my parents had to escape. They all left. The very story you talk about, you are essentially living it. You're thinking about your mom and dad and your grandparents."

That kind of round-the-clock commitment, Gibson admitted, isharder to imagine now. "It's fair to say across the board whether it's digital, print or television, newsroom staff have significantly reduced."

As the 20th anniversary approached, she was busy working on special reports for the TV station, whose changing ownership also reflects what is happening more broadly in the broadcast news industry.

During Katrina, the CBS-affiliated WWL-TV was owned by Belo Corp., which was acquired by Gannett in 2013. Two years later, Gannett spun off its broadcasting division into a separate company called Tegna. Then on Aug. 19 of this year, 10 days before the Katrina anniversary, Nextstar announced that it had purchased rival Tegna in a $6.2 billion deal that still has to be approved by the FCC.

"Unfortunately we are in a space where we no longer have infinite resources and infinite talent," Gibson said. "We don't have the amount of people we once had. We don't have the people to shoot the kinds of stories you've seen me cover. The stories are turning a little slowly, slower than I would like." But, she added, "we're still keeping up with the demand."

In many ways, as the legacy media has become smaller in the city, the nonprofit model has become central to New Orleans media, though it is much more fractured.

Karen Gadbois, who co-founded The Lens in 2009, began blogging about demolitions and housing policy after Katrina.

"Our policy is we do the after," she said. "We don't have the capacity to be at every flooded street corner. But we can hold officials accountable for the promises they make in recovery."

For storm coverage as it happened, she said much of the city would probably turn to radio. "I think WWL would be that landing place. Whether they're prepared for it, I don't know. But in a disaster, people who've been through it before — that's still where they turn."

Baquet said if Katrina were to happen in New Orleans again today, the small non-profits would cover the story, although it would be different.

"I think the coverage would wind up being what it ultimately became after we learned how to cover it," he said. "We'd jump on why this happened."

That orientation reflects a broader shift: whereas the Times-Picayune once served as an all-purpose institution, today's outlets specialize in community engagement, investigative depth and neighborhood service journalism. Each covers a piece of what used to be centralized.

"The one thing we knew when we started Verite News is that it wouldn't be everything to everybody," Baquet said. "We weren't going to be the paper of record. We had a niche, which was covering communities that had long been ignored by the big media organizations."

New Orleans faces the next storm with a patchwork of smaller, more specialized newsrooms. The voices are still there, more diverse, more rooted in community, but fewer in number and stretched thin.

When the next Katrina comes, as scientists warn it inevitably will, the city's residents may again find themselves not only battling the floodwaters but also searching for where to turn, and who to trust, for the story of their survival.

"All the news exists electronically, and our electric grid is not reinforced," said Vicki A. Mayer, professor of communication at Tulane University. "After Ida and we sat in the dark for two weeks, nothing local was online. If you could get the Internet through your phone, then you could go somewhere for news. But these stories were not local."

Like many outlets in New Orleans, Verite, which focuses on the city's majority Black population, published anniversary coverage in the months leading up to the 20th anniversary.

The series, "What was lost," invited readers to submit stories of the little things they lost that trigger the most vivid memories: a job at the nation's oldest public hospital, a record collection, pianos that once belonged to Fats Domino. It includes Baquet's own reflection on the Japanese koi pond that he and his family lost when their historic Creole cottage in the 7th Ward flooded and then was looted.

The news outlet also is reporting stories that examine whether New Orleans is prepared for another natural disaster.

"A Katrina should never ever happen again to New Orleans, but it will," Baquet said. "I don't think the fixes they put in place are going to be enough to really protect us. I think explaining why New Orleans is still vulnerable is an important story to tell."

The Times-Picayune

50 CENTS 169TH YEAR NO. 225 FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2005 HURRICANE EDITION

'HELP US, PLEASE'

AFTER THE DISASTER, CHAOS AND LAWLESSNESS RULE THE STREETS

STAFF PHOTO BY BRETT DUKE

NEW ORLEANS: A distraught Angela Perkins screams "Help us, please!" outside the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center on Thursday. A cloud of desperation settled over the hundreds of hungry, homeless people at the Convention Center, creating an atmosphere of fear and hopelessness.

Local leaders call relief efforts too little, too late

By Jed Horne
Staff writer

New Orleans on Thursday pulled back from an almost complete collapse of public order, a near anarchy that had supplanted receding floodwaters as the gravest threat to the city's still tenuous recovery.

Evidence that authorities were beginning to get a grip on gargantuan problems varied from the successful and orderly evacuation of Baptist Mercy Hospital to a sharp reduction in the menacing bands of idle refugees, many of them intent on looting that had haunted Uptown neighborhoods in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

With thousands of National Guard troops being mustered to join the Louisiana guardsmen already deployed to the hurricane-stricken city, one of the early signs of the beefed-up military presence was a Blackhawk helicopter touching down near the Riverwalk to deliver water to some 1,000 refugees still sheltered in the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center.

The mounting relief effort did not allay concerns from local officials that it remained too little and mighty late. And Thursday offered continuing evidence that the city's flirtation with sheer chaos was not yet over: a medivac helicopter scared off by gunfire as it attempted to airlift patients from a downtown hospital; the Oakwood Mall reduced to charred rubble after looters broke in and set fires throughout the sprawling complex; corpses floating in flooded streets; scores of police officers simply abandoning their posts to flee a city gone at least temporarily mad.

State Police Cmdr. Henry Whitehorn said some troopers had resigned rather than accept an assignment to go into New Orleans.

He was uncertain how many, but I

See **EFFORTS**, *page 4*

STAFF PHOTO BY ALEX BRANDON

NEW ORLEANS: Renowned singer Charmaine Neville weeps Thursday after telling New Orleans police Capt. Jeff Winn how she and others were attacked in her home after the hurricane.

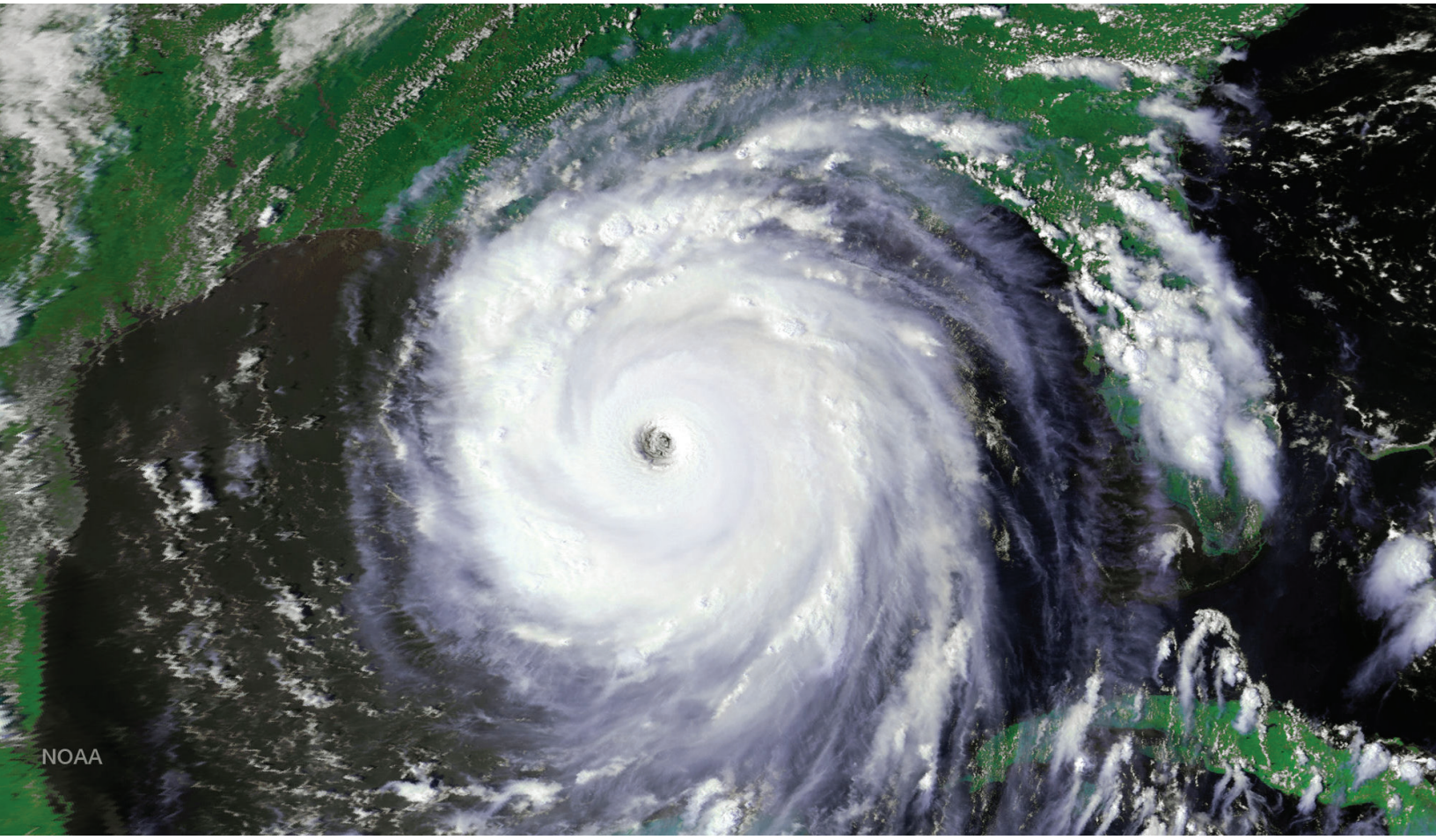
Blanco demands thousands of troops

By Paul Purpura and Ed Anderson
Staff writers

BATON ROUGE - Thousands of National Guard troops are converging on southeastern Louisiana, and Gov. Kathleen Blanco on Thursday called for no less than 40,000 troops to be on the ground. But it remained unclear how many soldiers will be assigned to quell the violence that is sweeping the New Orleans area.

If we need more, I will ask for it, Blanco said Thursday in Baton Rouge. Looting and lawlessness will not be tolerated.

See **BLANCO**, *page 5*



NOAA

Image of Hurricane Katrina captured by NOAA-16 This image of Hurricane Katrina was taken by the NOAA-16 AVHRR instrument at 2010Z on Aug. 28, 2005.

A wake-up call': The surge, change and challenges of climate coverage across U.S. media

By Allie Miller

When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in August 2005, the storm was a breaking news catastrophe, not a climate story. More than 1,800 people were killed and entire neighborhoods were submerged, yet the national conversation focused on government failures and the scale of human suffering, with little coverage on what rising seas or warming waters might mean for future storms.

At the time, climate coverage existed but was scattered. Reporters who worked those beats say conversations about the connections between extreme weather and global warming were limited — and often sidelined in daily news coverage.

In the years since, climate journalism has expanded rapidly at both the national and local levels. A 2024 study found that between 2011 and 2022, climate change coverage rose 144% at state and local outlets, and nearly tripled — up 299% — at what the study labeled "elite" national outlets, including The New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times and USA Today.

Climate desks in newsrooms were introduced during that time, too. After shuttering its environment desk in 2013, The New York Times launched its climate desk in 2017. The Washington Post introduced its climate desk in 2018. The Associated Press and NPR both began their climate desks in 2022. The multi-publication consortium Climate Desk, a national desk with about 16 partners that contribute climate related stories including The Guardian, Slate and Inside Climate News, started in 2010.

NPR Miami Correspondent Greg Allen, who has been a reporter for over 40 years and covered Katrina on the frontlines of the storm for NPR, said even though the U.S. had experienced hurricanes in the past, at the time Katrina hit, it was one of the first storms that got peoples' attention.

> "Katrina was a wake-up call," he said. "And since then, we've had a number of wake-up calls.
>
> — Greg Allen

"Katrina was a wake-up call," he said. "And since then, we've had a number of wake-up calls."

There was Hurricane Ida in 2021, which made landfall in Louisiana; Hurricane Ian hit Florida and the Carolinas in 2022. Then there was Hurricane Helene in North Carolina last September, the deadliest hurricane to hit the U.S. since Katrina. And on July 4, the flash flood in Texas took an estimated 138 lives — it was the deadliest of its kind in the country since 1976.

SURGE continued on Page 10

Environmental reporter warned of challenges before Katrina

By Charles James IV

It was 4 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 27, 2005. Mark Schleifstein, one of the country's few dedicated environmental reporters at the time, sat at his usual spot in The Times-Picayune newsroom with his desktop computer glowing in front of him. He looked out over the Broad Street overpass through bulletproof windows as editors spoke behind him.

He had argued with the paper's publisher and editors earlier that day over a Louisiana State University professor's map of potentially deadly storm surge damage from the incoming Hurricane Katrina being displayed on the front page. The editors were wary of panicking readers.

Schleifstein's phone rattled at his desk. He picked up and recognized the voice of Max Mayfield, director of the National Hurricane Center, asking him, "How high is The Times-Picayune's building and what winds could it withstand?"

"The building should be safe, maybe water at the bottom," Schleifstein responded.

Schleifstein's experience in environmental reporting gave him a unique sense of the danger coming. His push through the years for the newspaper to cover the topic fully had earned the trust of his peers, local residents, politicians and weather professionals like Mayfield.

Mayfield was calling that day to ensure the New Orleans mayor, who had not yet issued a mandatory evacuation order, understood the risks of Hurricane Katrina. The National Hurricane Center had just upgraded the storm in its 4 p.m. forecast to its highest intensity, Category 5, with top winds of 165 miles per hour and a potential for catastrophic damage and loss of life.

"We knew something was going to happen, and it was going to be bad," Schleifstein recalled.

In an afternoon news conference, after talking to Louisiana's governor and Mayfield, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin strongly urged residents to evacuate, even though state law did not allow him to order a mandatory evacuation. That early evacuation notice saved many lives, as about 1.2 million people with transportation access left the metropolitan area successfully, Schleifstein said, although bumper-to-bumper traffic caused delays of up to 10 hours. Some people suffered heart attacks from the stress.

The city opened the Superdome stadium as a shelter "of last resort," and city buses transported people without an evacuation plan there. An estimated 20,000 people became stranded there in squalid conditions for days without adequate food or water. Another 20,000 to 30,000 people, many of whom had been rescued from flooded homes, wound up nearby at the convention center in similar conditions.

Schleifstein's stories had warned of the city's inadequate evacuation plans years before.

For years, the paper had restricted its coverage to a condensed delivery of preparedness information at the beginning of hurricane season and minor updates.

"I had been attempting to talk the editors into doing a broader view of what the potential was for storms," Schleifstein explained.

In 2001, he proposed a series that would do just that. Schleifstein remembered one editor calling his interest in writing about storm damage "disaster porn," but Schleifstein retorted that 100,000 people in the city had no transportation. "I don't think that's pornography," he said. "I think it's a real problem."

With the aid of fellow reporter John McQuaid, then the paper's Washington, D.C. correspondent, Schleifstein gained support to write the stories he'd proposed in a series called "Washing Away," which ran in 2002. The series also highlighted the city's inadequate evacuation plan and fraudulent abuses of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. It explained that the earthen levees, a system built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, were too low because of yearslong erosion. As the earthen levees settled, they would be overtopped by major storms, leading to significant damage in the region, the series warned.

From 200 to 300 miles of levees were built on sinking ground, Schleifstein noted.

After Hurricane Katrina, forensic investigators found its designs were based on the strength of past storms. While Katrina's top wind speed dropped to Category 3 strength as it went ashore, the surge created during several days of Category 5 strength offshore led to levees overtopping in St. Bernard Parish and along the Lake Pontchartrain lakefront.

He described Hurricane Katrina as the marriage between "horrible timing" and a "horrible storm" — creating the "perfect storm."

Schleifstein and his wife, Diane, were among the nearly 250 staff members and relatives who were evacuated from the newsroom as flood waters rose around the building the day after the storm. Employees rode in separate trucks from their family members. Schleifstein's wife was in a truck headed for Baton Rouge, while his truck headed west to Houma, Louisiana, where the local newspaper had offered the Times-Picayune staff a place to work.

The Schleifsteins were separated for three days without contact.

"I knew Diane was on her way to Baton Rouge and out of harm's way," Mark Schleifstein said. "We took care of ourselves."

To Diane Schleifstein, the journey to Baton Rouge felt like the Israelites' long journey through the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea. When her truck stopped for gas in Thibodaux, a town southwest of New Orleans, she befriended a woman who was pumping gas, learned the stranger was traveling to the Baton Rouge airport and hitched a ride with her. There, Diane Schleifstein bought a ticket and flew to Atlanta.

In Houma, Mark Schleifstein took dictation over the phone from reporters in the field, particularly those who had stayed in New Orleans. He worked many late nights with frequent calls to editors out of state to help the paper maintain its online presence.

"I was the guy inside the building, capturing information from others and putting it out there," Mark Schleifstein said.

Diane Schleifstein also had much on her plate.

"He was dealing with work, but I was dealing with work, the house and the family," she said.

The couple's Lakeview home took in 15 feet of water, including two feet on the second floor. When the waters subsided, they burst open a door from the back yard, and the decorated reporter retrieved his awards, piece by piece. The waterline marked across a beloved cartoon, a gift award-winning editorial cartoonist Walt Handelsman had given him in 2000. It hung halfway up the staircase to the second floor.

"Schleify, hurricane season would be no fun without you," Handelsman wrote on the last panel.

For Diane Schleifstein, dealing with the insurance agencies "was a very difficult process for smart people. The rules kept changing."

It would take two years to resolve the insurance issues. The couple opted to sell the house and give the buyer all funds to restore the property. They relocated to a New Orleans suburb and hung the Handelsman cartoon in their new home.

Change has come in Katrina's wake, as New Orleans boasts the greatest levee system "in the world," Schleifstein said, but there is still progress to be made. He cited Bangladesh's vertical evacuation methods and use of non-governmental organizations as a model of inspiration for Louisiana.

Now retired, Schleifstein does freelance reporting on environmental issues and advises The Times-Picayune's environment reporting team. He also co-authored a book, "Path of Destruction: The Devastation of New Orleans and the Coming Age of Superstorms."

SURGE

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"I kind of see Katrina as being the inflection point where it reminded you that it's not just weather — it can change the entire country's direction," Allen said, who also has been reporting on the Texas floods this summer.

Allen said he doesn't recall much focus on climate change in reporting at the time Katrina hit, but there were some local and national outlets who used that angle.

Despite Katrina capturing America's attention as a tragedy — with people still grappling with its devastation today — experts and climate reporters say it likely wasn't the catalyst for the surge in climate change coverage.

David G. Victor, author of a June 2024 study on elite and non-elite climate coverage and professor and director of innovation and public policy at the University of California San Diego, said he thinks "if we rewound the tape in history" and didn't have Katrina or Hurricane Rita a month later, "we'd be more or less in the same place."

"Those ended up being the most extreme weather-related events in the advanced industrialized countries and so people tend to link them, but I think that's correlation, not causation," Victor said.

Mark Schleifstein, who spent over 40 years at the Times-Picayune in New Orleans and won a Pulitzer Prize for his Katrina coverage in 2006, said before Katrina happened, climate change and global warming would be an aside in his stories by mentioning that they'd likely be causing changes in the future.

"In most cases, my stories were aimed at what's causing land loss in Louisiana at the time, climate change was not the key element, and it wasn't the key element that was considered in state plans, or anything else at that time," Schleifstein said. "Katrina really was a major change in the way that everybody looked at it, even though, in New Orleans, Katrina was not a climate change event."

Climate journalist Andrew Revkin, who spent nearly 22 years at The New York Times and now publishes a Substack called "Sustain What," also said Katrina wasn't a pivotal landmark for climate change reporting, but was a "multi-dimensional shift" in subsequent years that drove coverage shifts.

> **"You still see this prevalent on certain TV channels where you'll have a climate change scientist and then a climate change denier or skeptic, and so this can amplify uncertainty and encourage political action. And it's problematic because it creates a biased account of climate change, because it implies that the scientific community is split down the middle."**
>
> **— Julia Grant**

"If anything, what I would say is a lot of my colleagues in the media covering climate were so caught up in the climate change part of the [Katrina] story that they neglected to dive deep on the issue of what makes a community at risk from climate hazards," Revkin said.

'Don't we have to tell both sides?'

In a polarized world where climate change has long been politicized, reporters and analysts said there are challenges that come with reporting on the topic.

When Julie Grant, managing editor and reporter at Pittsburgh-based Allegheny Front, was a reporter at a radio station in the early 2000s, she said the news director would ask, "When we talk about climate change, don't we have to tell both sides?"

"You know how you have to balance your story and say, 'Some people believe this is happening,' and I just remember having that debate, like, 'No, we shouldn't say that,'" Grant recalled.

The attempt to find balance can create bias, said Lucy McAllister, assistant professor of sustainability & environmental studies, who also co-authored a 2021 study about print media coverage of climate change over the past three decades.

"You still see this prevalent on certain TV channels where you'll have a climate change scientist and then a climate change denier or skeptic, and so this can amplify uncertainty and encourage political action," she explained. "And it's problematic because it creates a biased account of climate change, because it implies that the scientific community is split down the middle."

Victor agreed that journalism's reliance on balance can create a bias.

He said he doesn't think balance means interviewing unqualified sources and quoting misinformation under the guise of covering all sides. "A journalist, actually, I believe, has an obligation to not just present all views as if all views are equally meritorious," Victor said.

Following Katrina, the topics of climate and climate change became more politicized — in 2009 there was Climategate, when emails from a university's research unit were hacked by climate change deniers claiming scientists manipulated data to fake global warming; in the same year the cap-and-trade bill addressed the changing climate and restricted greenhouse gas emissions. Revkin cited both events as driving an increase in reporting.

Part of the solution for the balance bias can come from journalists utilizing resources like the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change, a United Nations group, said Revkin and McAllister.

Though she hasn't done any studies on the solutions specifically, McAllister, who has long analyzed media coverage of climate change, said while she recognizes the complexity of all the topics journalists may cover, communicating the complexity of climate change to general audiences is a challenge.

"I think that the specialization and the expertise required is significant on this topic," she said. "So I think that if the resources are there to have dedicated journalists who have knowledge on this area, it is especially important for this topic."

If reporters can begin with the risk formulate of "risk equals the hazard, fire, flood, whatever, times exposure, how many people, how much stuff, and factoring in vulnerability," Revkin said, "it's a way to strip away all the narrative tussles that are underway to try to grab your attention."

"If we start with the phrase 'climate risk' as we look at something that happens in the world, that changes everything in a constructive way, because I learned from all my disaster coverage, including earthquakes and the like, how disaster scholars and disaster experts think, and they always start with what I described earlier," Revkin explained, which is the risk formula.

Revkin said it's also important for reporters to focus on what readers care about in the face of a disaster, which is usually telling what happened.

"The best climate coverage was just like minded reporters, and you needed an editor who got excited about a particular framing for a series or a project, with or without a [climate] desk," Revkin said. "And once you have a desk though, then it's hungry for that thing called climate reporting."

Julia Rendleman for GJR

Chris Karadjov prepares to fly with SIU Aviation's Able Flight Sunday, July 20, 2025 at Southern Illinois airport in Murphysboro, Illinois.

How a journalism professor is redefining inclusion for people with disabilities

By Adriana Bzovii

The skies above southern Illinois offered a new perspective this summer for Chris Karadjov — associate journalism professor, Bulgarian immigrant and now, licensed pilot.

After years of curiosity and a long-delayed dream, Karadjov arrived at the airport near Marion, Illinois in May to begin intensive flight training through Able Flight, a nonprofit that helps people with disabilities earn their pilot certificates. Each day, after hours of lessons at Southern Illinois University Carbondale's School of Aviation, he returned to town, exhausted, often accompanied by Ahri, his Shiba Inu.

"Until two months ago, I had no idea how it felt to fly," said Karadjov, now in his twentieth year at California State University Long Beach. "It's probably one of the most challenging things I've ever done."

Becoming a pilot wasn't a childhood fantasy. In fact, Karadjov once feared flying, but after a brief introductory flight, gifted by his wife more than a decade ago, the idea quietly took root. However, shortly after, a skiing accident in 2012 left him with a spinal cord injury. "I was just skiing for fun. And then, I just did not make a turn correctly and hit my back on a tree," Karadjov said.

Now, over 13 years after that first taste of aviation, Karadjov has completed solo flights and mastered the theory, meteorology and precision required to fly. His July training marked the end of one journey and the beginning of another.

"I got terrible motion sickness. I was afraid that I won't be able to continue in the program," he said. "You have at least two flights a day. This is several hours of flying. It's hot, it's noisy. It's a lot of things that you have to get used to. It's overwhelming."

Although Karadjov is very open to sharing his experience across social media and with other journalists, he hates being an inspirational story. "Because then you reduce your disability. And you're not that. Would you treat a person who is black versus white any differently? So why would you treat a person with a disability differently?" Karadjov said. "I don't argue with people but it's reducing the person to their disability, which is wrong. Just like it's wrong to reduce a person to their race, gender, whatever."

Growing up in a Soviet culture where the lives of people with disabilities were perceived as ended, his perspective changed when visiting a friend in Stanford, California, in 1996, long before he became disabled himself.

"They were giving us a tour of the campus and we went to the college radio station. There was a guy in a wheelchair. I looked at him, I chatted with him. He was a DJ at the station. He was, I don't remember, a graduate or undergraduate, majoring in computer science. And he had a girlfriend. Wow, so people in wheelchairs can have a life?" Karadjov said.

Able Flight is a national nonprofit program founded in 2006 with the mission to expand the capabilities of people with disabilities. Before this year, 98 people have earned pilot certificates, and 10 Able Flight pilots own or are building their own airplanes.

For every student pilot, the first solo flight is one of the most memorable experiences; Karadjov's first flight was on June 26. "You make your radio calls to the tower telling them that you're ready. Then you accelerate. That's the first time you took off and landed by yourself," he said. "It keeps you doing things. Not just for anybody with a disability. It is for any person. If you don't keep yourself sharp, you don't challenge yourself, it's very easy to slide."

He said such flight training is an efficient intervention to improve the access of people with disabilities to more opportunities — and to educate society. "It's a great way to normalize disability. The more you see disabilities, the more people with disabilities have equal access and equal opportunity to do things," Karadjov said.

The experience of becoming a licensed pilot gave him more than just the opportunity to learn to fly; the professor became a student again and enjoyed every moment of this adventure. "One of my instructors is 22. That's the age of my students. The head of the program was asking me how I would feel being taught by somebody half my age, " Karadjov said. "I'm a professor in my field. I'm nobody in aviation. They're my teachers. There are rules that you have to follow; otherwise, you die or somebody else dies."

The next plan is to find an aircraft with adaptive pilot controls and more opportunities to fly across the U.S. "Once you get the license, it's like renting a car. It's more expensive, obviously. But you can share the cost with friends. There are ways to do it. With the adaptive controls, there are not many planes. That's the challenge," Karadjov said. "But I'm addicted."

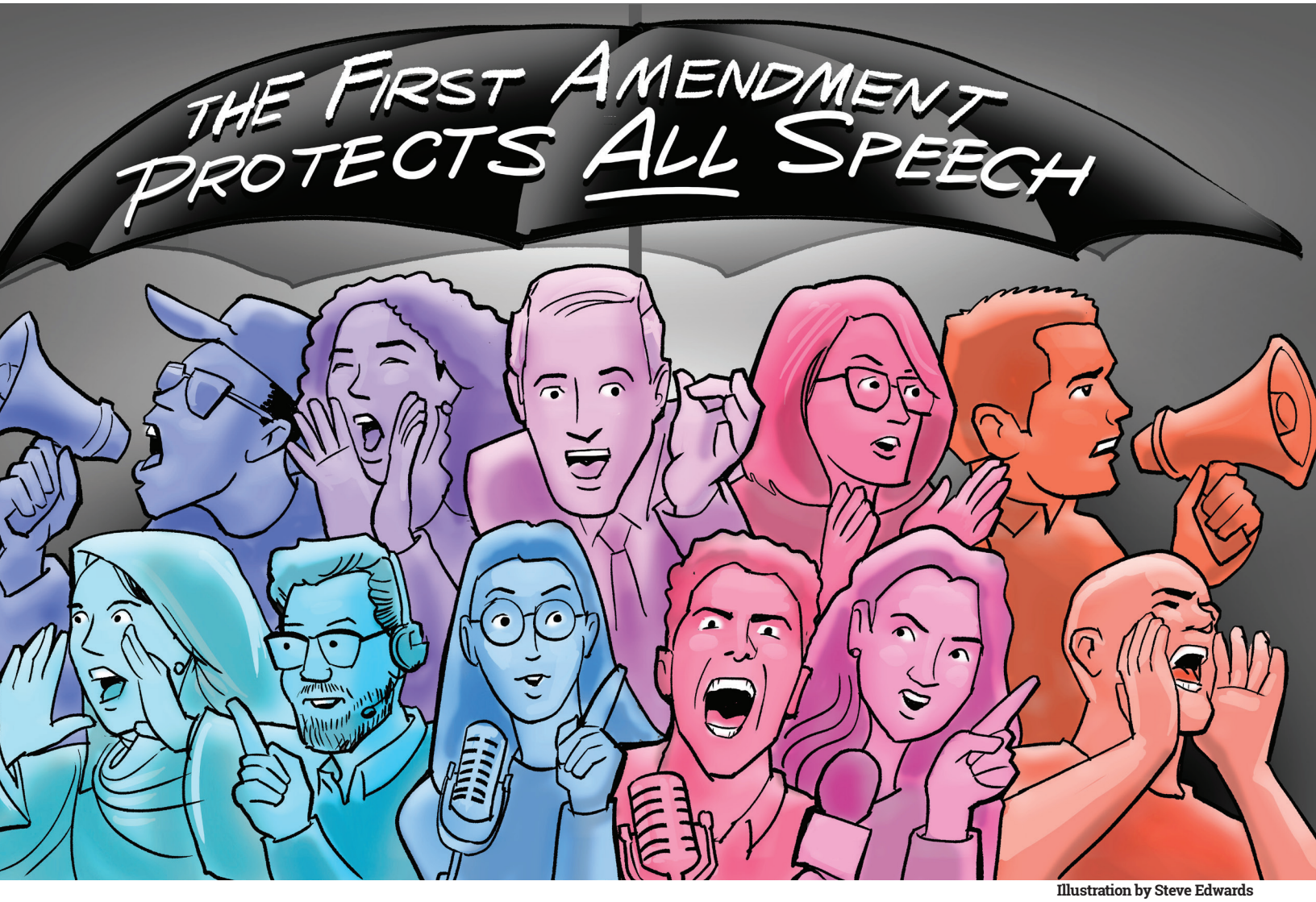

Illustration by Steve Edwards

The First Amendment is for everyone — equally

By William H. Freivogel

This is the first in a series of stories about the First Amendment as the nation stands at the doorstep of the 250th anniversary of the document that laid out America's Enlightenment values — freedom, equality and a government of the people. The First Amendment protects no ideology or creed, but all ideologies and creeds. It could be a starting point for a divided nation to talk to one another because it belongs to us all and is intended to facilitate democratic conversation. This project is funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and will contain the work of young journalists in Missouri, Illinois and other parts of the Midwest. The series will conclude with a special issue in December containing the young journalists' stories about First Amendment disputes from Nixa, Missouri., to Washington University, to Carbondale and Breese, Il. and beyond to Indiana, Ohio and Iowa, where hundreds of books were removed from library shelves.

The First Amendment protects everyone's freedom — Nazis, Klansmen, Proud Boys, communists, Christians, flag burners, cross burners, Bible and Koran burners, Jehovah's Witnesses who won't salute the American flag, revolutionaries, fat cat campaign funders, Christian student groups, a Jewish high school graduate objecting to a graduation prayer, science teachers, public school students wearing arm bands to protest the war and even an angry 14-year-old who was so mad about being cut from the varsity cheer squad that she posted "F-cheer" on social media.

The First Amendment is nonpartisan. It protects Republicans every bit as much as Democrats, conservatives as much as liberals, "Woke" as well as politically "incorrect" speech.

There is no partisan objection to free speech — although there are plenty of reasons to object to a lot of the hateful speech protected by the First Amendment.

Take this month in Breese, Illinois, when the Proud Boys, a designated hate group tied to the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, put up a billboard near the high school. The Clinton County Board would have been violating the First Amendment to take it down, but about 70 people who showed up at their board meeting to exercise their free speech rights, quickly persuaded the company that owned the billboard to remove the Proud Boys' message — as Molly Parker of Capitol News Illinois reported last week. The United Methodist Church followed up with a $2,100 billboard purchase for a "Hate divides, Love unites" message.

The idea of the First Amendment is to protect the expression people hate. There is no need for a First Amendment to protect popular ideas. The majority won't outlaw speech it likes. This is why the First Amendment protects all sorts of distasteful speech that makes the majority mad. This includes hate speech, flag burning, cross-burning, Nazi parades, profanity, pornography, violent video games, politicians' lies, multi-million dollar contributions to political campaigns, slurs calling police pigs and Christian protests at soldiers' funerals with worshippers carrying signs saying "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers."

> **"The First Amendment rests on the Enlightenment premise, unfolding after the Middle Ages, that truth wins over falsity on the battlefield of ideas. As John Milton put it in the 17th century: 'who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?'"**

Nazis can parade through south St. Louis or through Skokie in front of Holocaust survivors. The Ku Klux Klan can wear hoods and robes, burn a cross and promise "vengeance" against "n....." and "Jews" in a farm field near Cincinnati. A Vietnam protester can walk through a courthouse with a jacket that says, "F- the draft." Protesters can burn the flag outside George H.W. Bush's nominating convention. Pornographer Larry Flynt can publish a parody of the Rev. Jerry Falwell having sex with his mother in an outhouse in order to spoof the Christian majority. The alt-right — and the left for that matter — can post fake news on the Internet to tilt an election — although they may pay the price if they recklessly disregard the truth, as Fox News, Rudy Giuliani and Newsmax discovered after 2020.

Enlightenment values

This moment in our history is an especially appropriate one to celebrate. We're on the doorstep of the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in which the nation's founders declared their allegiance to the core principles of the Enlightenment that the nation still cherishes — liberty, equality and consent of the governed.

It read: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Sure, Jefferson owned hundreds of slaves, the Founding Fathers were all rich men, women weren't mentioned and had few rights and slavery besmirched the Founding — no matter how badly President Trump would like the Smithsonian to rewrite history so slavery doesn't look so bad.

The founders even left democracy, equality and free speech out of the Constitution.

But liberty, equality and the consent of "We the people" have survived past the four score and seven years that Lincoln spoke about on the Gettysburg battlefield and have expanded over our history. The United States is the freest country on earth, equality has expanded with almost every passing decade as has the power of the people to give their consent.

The First Amendment rests on the Enlightenment premise, unfolding after the Middle Ages, that truth wins over falsity on the battlefield of ideas. As John Milton put it in the 17th century: "who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?"

Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the great Supreme Court justices of the 20th century, put the same idea in the libertarian lexicon of free markets.

> "When men have realized that time has upset many fighting faiths," he wrote in a 1919 dissent, "they may come to believe, even more than they believe the very foundations of their own conduct that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas — that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market, and that truth is the only ground upon which their wishes safely can be carried out."

One question today is whether the clattering voices of millions of people and trillions of electronic bytes can be sorted into the truth. Does that screen in front of you give you time to think through the Enlightenment values that our Founding Fathers had plenty of time to ponder while holding their quill pens? Are we even reading the words of people or of robots?

Mark Sableman, a media lawyer at Thompson Coburn, has his doubts after litigating First Amendment issues for decades. He remembers how he and others welcomed the birth of the internet and cell phones that democratized speech by putting a printing press in everyone's pocket or purse. His enthusiasm has evaporated with the avalanche of false news and information flashing across those little screens in bursts of a few seconds that shatter the Enlightenment ideal of contemplative thought.

Rebel to fat cat

About 100 years ago, a news reporter named Frank I. Cobb wrote that, "The Bill of Rights is a born rebel. It reeks with sedition. In every clause it shakes its fist in the face of constituted authority…It is the one guarantee of human freedom to the American people."

It is a charter to say no — No, I don't agree with the president. No, I won't bow to any orthodoxy, religious or political, woke or not.

No, I won't worship someone else's god and I don't want the government to tell me whether or how to worship. No, the government can't tell me what to think or what to say or view or draw or photograph or read.

For the nation's first 130 years, the First Amendment was weak. It didn't even apply to the states at first.

When the Supreme Court began reading power into the First Amendment about 100 years ago, it began by defending those shaking their fist at the government.

At first it protected outsiders. Now it increasingly protects establishment insiders.

By its 200th birthday in 1991, the First Amendment had developed into a powerful shield against government abuse of leftists, anarchists, communists, labor unions, Jehovah's Witnesses, atheists and non-Christians. It protected the press from government censorship and debilitating libel suits. It protected leftist flag burners and a dissident wearing a "F- the draft" jacket into a California courthouse. And it protected little Mary Beth Tinker wearing an armband to school protesting the Vietnam War.

Today's First Amendment winners are increasingly well-heeled. Corporations won the right to spend an unlimited amount of corporate money — millions, billions — to help their favored candidate win an election. Elon Musk — the wealthiest man on the planet, whose SpaceX company owns two-thirds of all satellites whirling around the earth and whose social media account gives him 200 million followers — spent a quarter of a billion dollars to get Trump elected. That included the highly misleading $20 million "RBG" fund likening Trump's abortion views to Ruth Bader Ginsburg's, even though it was Trump's Supreme Court nominee replacing Ginsburg who provided the decisive vote overturning Roe v. Wade.

Hobby Lobby won a decision based on religious liberty allowing it to refuse to provide contraceptive health coverage for its female workers. Conservative policy groups won an Illinois case blocking government unions from imposing mandatory union fees on non-members. The court has lent a sympathetic ear to bakers and florists who say they won't serve same-sex couples whose marriages violated their religious beliefs. And human rights lawyers lost their right to counsel foreign clients connected to terrorism about nonviolent conflict resolution.

Gregory P. Magarian, the Thomas and Karole Greene Professor of Law at Washington University and a former Supreme Court clerk, has put it this way: "The court has put much more energy into expanding the free speech rights of politically or economically powerful speakers, while largely disdaining the First Amendment concerns of politically and economically disempowered speakers."

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EVERYONE

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Justice Samuel Alito is a leader of the shift. Alito wrote the Hobby Lobby decision protecting corporate religious scruples. In addition, his replacement of Sandra Day O'Connor led to Citizens United opening the door to unlimited corporate political spending.

"Justice Alito is passionately committed to protecting rights and interests of people exactly like Justice Alito," Magarian has said.

"Woke" excesses

"Woke" sensibilities about speech offensive to minorities, women, gays and transgendered people resulted in the censorship of students and academics at some of America's elite universities over the past decade and played no small role in the outcome of the 2024 election. Trigger warnings singled out speech that might offend or trigger hurtful responses.

In 2023 Scott Gerber, a professor at Ohio Northern University, was a victim of woke speech. He wrote an article for The Cincinnati Enquirer that criticized DEI and it led to his firing.

"Unfortunately," he wrote in the newspaper column, "because racial preferences are the sacred cow of higher education, well-settled anti-discrimination law is frequently flouted on college and university campuses, including in Ohio. For example, jobs are frequently set aside for minorities and women, and conservative and libertarian white males need not apply, or so it seems. I have heard of faculty searches in which a member of the faculty or administration has stated that his or her school has an open position, but that the position must (not 'could') be filled by a minority or a woman. In fact, the faculty hiring process has gotten so out of hand that one law school did not immediately disqualify a minority candidate who recently had failed the bar examination."

On April 14, 2023, shortly after the article was published, school security — with armed police officers from Ada, Ohio — removed Gerber from his classroom in the presence of students and escorted him to Dean Charles H. Rose III. The dean told he had to either resign or face termination, even though he did not tell Gerber what he had done wrong.

In a 2024 lawsuit, Gerber said that the university was firing him "based on his unpopular views and his raising concerns about illegal conduct — including racially discriminatory hiring — at the University."

This year, the university settled with Gerber, reinstated him and allowed him to retire in good standing.

Free speech has especially been underl assault since the Oct. 3, 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israelis.

The vignette in the introduction to Harvard's internal investigation of Anti-Semtism on campus is powerful evidence of its prevalence at the nation's wealthiest and most powerful university.

The vignette recounts how during the 2023-4 school year an undergraduate recipient of a student fellowship was given the opportunity to make a short speech at a student forum. The Jewish student planned to describe how their experience as a grandchild of Holocaust survivors inspired their career ambitions.

He shared his prepared remarks with a student organizer of the forum. The Jewish student speaker described how their grandfather survived the Holocaust by migrating to the then-British Mandate of Palestine, and ultimately helped tens of thousands of others find refuge in territory that is now part of the modern State of Israel.

The Harvard report relates what happened next: "The [student] directors of the conference pulled me aside and said that I cannot mention my grandfather's rescue missions in my speech, because his rescue missions involve Israel. Nowhere does my speech mention the current war or Zionism. It is strictly about the Holocaust.

"[The two student organizers] told me that my family's Holocaust narrative is not 'tasteful' and … I asked 'what is not tasteful?' [One of the students] laughed in my face and said, 'oh my God.' This response was incredibly hurtful and inappropriate. They told me that my family history is inherently one-sided because it does not acknowledge the displacements of Palestinian populations, and I believe this accusation is an antisemitic double standard."

The Harvard report adds, "According to the student speaker, while the forum organizers eventually allowed the speaker to mention their grandfather's rescue mission, they insisted that the speaker omit reference to the British Mandate of Palestine as their grandfather's destination."

The Harvard report said, "In many ways, this story epitomizes what we heard about the experiences of numerous Jewish and Israeli students at Harvard in the period after the October 7, 2023 attacks on Israel. Some Jewish students were informed by peers, teaching fellows, and in some cases, faculty, that they were associated with something offensive, and, in some cases, that their very presence was an offense."

The report notes that, "Our work was preceded by a letter from 33 Harvard student groups that held Israel 'entirely responsible' for the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. The letter, which was made public as the Hamas invasion of Israel was still underway, caught Harvard's Jewish community in a moment of intense vulnerability and grief and created a horrifying split screen, as community members juxtaposed horrific videos of violence and assault on Israeli civilians, all while encountering media reports in which fellow Harvard community members appeared to be blaming the victims, whose blood was not yet dry, for their own deaths."

Harvard also investigated anti-Muslim/Palestinian/Arab feeling on campus. It found discrimination against those speakers as well. It concluded that these students felt "abandoned and silenced" and that they saw their speech as less protected than Jewish students' speech.

It said, "The Harvard Corporation's decision to withhold degrees from 13 Harvard College graduating seniors, which precluded them from participating in the graduation ceremony — despite a vote of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to award the degrees — was seen by many as a chilling reminder of the consequences Harvard students can face for exercising free speech and engaging in student activism." 11 of the 13 eventually received the degrees.

One of the leading organizations fighting against campus speech codes and liberal campus orthodoxy was FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. It defended Gerber when he was fired at Northern Ohio and led criticism of Harvard's failure to protect unpopular speech.

Greg Lukianoff, FIRE's president, wrote an influential 2015 Atlantic story titled "The Coddling of the American Mind" in which he said young people were not prepared for life because the culture of "safe spaces" He also happened on and publicized what became a viral incident at Yale when a student was recorded screaming at a professor about his comments relating to appropriate and inappropriate Halloween costumes.

Now, however, with President Trump threatening hundreds of millions of dollars in fund cutoffs for universities, Lukianoff finds that the tables have turned and he and FIRE have become defenders of Harvard against Trump's efforts to cut off federal money based on the content of the campus speech — a purpose that is clearly a violation of the First Amendment.

Lukianoff has received pushback from conservative supporters and funders, but says the principles come first. "People care about freedom of speech when it's their side under the gun," he told the New York Times. "They don't care as much when it's anyone else."

Put simply, after running a campaign that criticized the First Amendment violations of "Woke" institutions, Trump is now violating the First Amendment rights of lawyers, colleges and media, who often are surrendering their rights without a legal fight.

Magarian, the Washington University First Amendment expert, points out, that far more pro-Palestinian speech was affected than pro-Israeli speech. In fact he says the attacks on pro-Palestinian speech are unprecedented this century.

"The scope of free speech violations against pro-Palestinian (broadly defined) speakers during the Gaza War dwarfs the scope of free speech violations against pro-Israel (broadly defined) speakers," he wrote in an email. "Actual First Amendment violations have almost universally targeted pro-Palestinian speakers, and in fact I would argue that government attacks grounded in the desire to silence or punish pro-Palestinian speech amount to the gravest concerted attack on First Amendment rights in this century."

Editor's Note: Mark Sableman is on the advisory board of GJR.

Illustration by Steve Edwards

Big institutions retreat from First Amendment fight

Media, universities and law groups forgo legal challenges as Trump reshapes Washington and curtails free-speech protections

By William H. Freivogel

Many powerful law firms, media conglomerates and elite universities have surrendered their First Amendment rights to President Donald Trump without going to court.

As a result, President Trump has been able to use the cudgel of federal power to quickly win far-reaching victories over intellectual and cultural elites. This is particularly true when seen in the larger context of the defunding of public media, the imposition of Trump-approved ideology at the Smithsonian Institution, Trump's takeover of the Kennedy Center and the loss of thousands of international students and hundreds of millions in cuts in the NIH funding at universities.

Taken together, Trump's exercise of raw power has prevailed over many institutions whose purpose is the acquisition and spread of knowledge.

The change he has wrought in the first months of his second term have been consequential and may be seen by historians to be as far-reaching as the changes of the Ronald Reagan and Franklin D. Roosevelt presidencies. The changes accomplished in the name of ending "Woke" abuses to the free expression have done serious damage to free expression and the unfettered pursuit of knowledge.

The checks and balances of the Constitution have done little to slow the changes. The Republican controlled Congress has approved almost all of them and the U.S. Supreme Court has not significantly pushed back. Instead it has allowed the changes to go into effect before it could even consider the merits of legal challenges. The late August decision allowing massive, $783 million cuts to NIH grants tied to diversity was almost entirely consumed by arguments over procedure. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson wrote it was the latest in a line of "Calvinball jurisprudence" — a reference to a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon — "with a twist. Calvinball has only one rule: There are no fixed rules. We seem to have two: that one, and this Administration always wins."

The changes have come with an ironic twist in that the federal power and civil rights laws wielded by Democratic presidents in the 1960s to be equal rights to Blacks have been used by Trump to undo programs favoring diversity.

Big media caves

CBS, ABC, Columbia University and some of Washington D.C.'s most well-connected law firms have paid the Trump administration hundreds of millions of dollars instead of defending fundamental First Amendment rights that have been hard won over the past century and that courts would almost certainly uphold, say First Amendment experts of different political stripes.

CBS's editing of the 60 Minutes 2024 interview with Kamala Harris and George Stephanopoulos' characterization of the $5 million jury judgment against Trump for sexually abusing E. Jean Carroll were entirely defensible in court, media lawyers agree. But the corporate owners of those storied news organizations chose to pay tens of millions in settlements and attorneys fees rather than to contest Trump's extremely weak claims in court.

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INSTITUTIONS

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Trump's executive orders against big national law firms who had sued him and employed his critics were also meritless, as numerous federal courts have found when firms have taken them to court.

The executive orders removed legal opponents' security clearances, denied them access to federal court buildings and threatened to cut off federal contracts. Some of the big firms - first Skadden and Paul Weiss and then Willkie Farr, Milbank, Kirkland & Ellis, Latham & Watkins, A & O Shearman and Simpson, Thacher & Bartlett - capitulated and agreed to provide $100-$120 million in pro bono legal services to the White House. Pro bono legal services are supposed to be for people who are poor.

Paul Weiss said publicly that its work for the Trump administration would be limited "to assist our nation's veterans, to combat anti-Semitism, and to promote the fairness of the justice system." Now it turns out the firm and Kirkland & Ellis are defending the Commerce Department for free.

Meanwhile, Ivy League universities such as Columbia University, Brown College and the University of Pennsylvania have bargained away important elements of their academic autonomy, Columbia paid $200 million, eliminated DEI programs, agreed to review curricula and personnel in Middle Eastern studies department, among other concessions that included no masks for demonstrators and a definition of anti-Semitism much broader than set in law.

Brown University is paying $50 million for Rhode Island state workforce initiatives and agreed to abide by Trump policies against trans athletes. The University of Pennsylvania reversed policies on trans athletes. The University of Virginia showed President James E. Ryan the door because the Justice Department criticized him for not making significant enough changes in DEI programs.

Harvard University is fighting in court, but is reported to be in talks with the Trump administration on a possible settlement to pay $500 million. The New York Times reported in recent days that Harvard took down websites for its Foundation for Intercultural and Race relations and websites for gay and female students, merging them into one. It has removed two leaders for the Center for Middle Eastern Studies after Jewish alums complained of antisemitic programming. Harvard also suspended the relationship with a top Palestinian university after Trump administration complaints and set up new partnerships with institutions in Israel.

WashU Chancellor Martin splits from most universities

In an effort led by Chancellor Andrew Martin of Washington University, a new group of universities has formed to take a compromise approach, maintaining that higher education has lost the confidence of the American people and needs reforms that ensure neutrality.

Washington University has scrubbed DEI from web sites, cracked down on pro-Palestinian demonstrations and closed the transgender clinic at Barnes Hospital after political pressure.

WashU Chancellor Martin has joined with Vanderbilt's president Daniel Diermeier in taking out a full-page ad in the Wall Street Journal calling for universities to reform themselves. The ad said, "Ideological forces in and outside of campuses have pulled too many universities away from the core purpose, principles and values that made them America's great engines of learning, innovation and discovery, and the envy of the world."

The two chancellors formed an invitation only group called the Universities for America's Future.

Martin explained this way in an interview this month with the Chronicle on Higher Education: "The reason why we're doing this is because we believe that the future of American higher education is at risk and that it is important for us to engage across the political spectrum, to listen and to understand what the criticisms are, to internalize those criticisms, and then work to improve so we can ultimately regain the trust of the American people."

As for the university retreat on DEI, Martin said after his State of the University speech in February, "I don't actually know what DEI is, and, in fact, I think that most people who are out in the world talking about 'DEI this, DEI that' don't have a precise definition of what DEI is." In May, the university appointed a committee to recommend changes in diversity education.

Princeton University president Christopher Eisgruber suggested at an April meeting of the Association of American Universities, which he chairs, that Martin and Diermeier were playing into Trump's hands.

As the Atlantic's Rose Horowitch put it: "(Princeton's) Eisgruber argued that higher education was facing a politically motivated attack, and that the two men were inadvertently making matters worse by agreeing with President Donald Trump, against the evidence, that the sector had grown illiberal and out of touch with mainstream America. The chancellors, taken aback by the public confrontation, countered that the struggles of a handful of Ivy League schools were dragging down the reputation of America's heavyweight research institutions. Perhaps, they suggested, it was time for the Ivies' leaders to step back and let new figures—such as themselves—represent the country's top universities."

Martin refused to sign an April letter, now endorsed by 661 university presidents and developed by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. The letter said, "As leaders of America's colleges, universities, and scholarly societies, we speak with one voice against the unprecedented government overreach and political interference now endangering American higher education. We are open to constructive reform and do not oppose legitimate government oversight. However, we must oppose undue government intrusion in the lives of those who learn, live, and work on our campuses. We will always seek effective and fair financial practices, but we must reject the coercive use of public research funding."

Washington University's student newspaper, Student Life, criticized Martin's failure to sign the letter, editorializing, "The Trump administration's attacks on both higher education and freedom of speech are part of a broader attempt to suppress knowledge, civil discourse, and the pursuit of truth. Universities have historically been key sites for activism and resistance — and WashU is no exception." Saint Louis University was one of the universities that signed.

In addition, almost 800 alums, faculty, staff, students and donors urged Martin to sign the strong letter.

Martin, in his responses to criticism, has said he has long supported university neutrality, which is required for free academic pursuits and adherence to First Amendment values.

Big media

Disney's ABC agreed to give $15 million to Trump's library and apologize for George Stephanopoulos' use of the word "rape" to refer to what Trump did to E. Jean Carroll in a New York department store in the mid 1990s. During a 2024 interview with Rep. Nancy Mace (R-SC), the "This Week" host said that Trump was "liable for rape".

A jury had found in 2023 that Trump had "sexually abused" her but she had failed to prove he raped her.

Carroll reiterated after the verdict that Trump had "raped" her, and Trump countersued for defamation. Federal Judge Lewis Kaplan threw out Trump's countersuit saying that Carroll's rape allegation was "substantially true."

By responding no to the question of whether Trump raped her, the jury indicated they weren't convinced Trump had penetrated her with his penis, as is required under New York criminal law, the judge said.

But Kaplan concluded that the jury was convinced that Trump penetrated her with his finger. "It accordingly is the 'truth,' as relevant here, that Mr. Trump digitally raped Ms. Carroll," Kaplan said. Trump denied any sexual encounter ever occurred.

Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger was reported in a leaked comment to be concerned that ABC could lose the case and weaken press protections by allowing an opening for the Supreme Court to overturn the landmark 1964 decision of New York Times v Sullivan. But First Amendment experts say ABC/Disney would have won the case in the Supreme Court and that it was Iger's surrender that undermined the decision.

The New York Times v. Sullivan standard is that a public official has to prove "actual malice," meaning reckless disregard for the truth, in order to win a libel case. Kaplan's dismissal of Trump's countersuit against Carroll and the judge's use of the word "rape" to describe Trump's actions, shows the weakness of the Trump case, lawyers say.

The New York Times decision in 1964 at the height of the Civil Rights Movement is a cornerstone of media protection in that it blocked the legal attempts of segregationist southern politicians to use libel cases to bankrupt national media and keep their cameras away from the brutality unleashed against civil rights protesters by southern sheriffs.

Paramount's settlement of Trump's $10 billion lawsuit against "60 Minutes" also resulted from bottom line corporate considerations.

Former 60 Minutes Executive Producer Bill Owens said he wouldn't apologize for the editing of the Harris answer in a question about the Middle East from Bill Whitaker. Harris gave a long answer, part of which 60 Minutes used during its show and a different part of which was aired the day before as a preview of the show - a standard editing procedure.

In one clip of the interview released by CBS, Harris responded: "Well, Bill, the work that we have done has resulted in a number of movements in that region by Israel that were very much prompted by, or a result of, many things, including our advocacy for what needs to happen in the region."

In the fuller version of the interview, Harris said: "We are not gonna stop pursuing what is necessary for the United States to be clear about where we stand on the need for this war to end."

"Face the Nation," broadcast an excerpt from Harris's interview "that used a longer section of her answer than that on 60 Minutes," said the network. "Same question. Same answer. But a different portion of the response," it said, adding that it aired Harris's shorter answer because it "was more succinct."

The Center for American Rights filed a complaint with the FCC last fall saying this was a "deliberate news distortion." The FCC dismissed the complaint in early January, but Trump's new FCC chair, Brendan Carr, reopened the case and demanded CBS turn over the full transcript. CBS published the transcript of the interview earlier this year.

Trump — who refused to be interviewed by 60 Minutes at the time it interviewed Harris — sued Paramount for $10 billion for the "news distortion."

Shari Redstone, Paramount's controlling shareholder, approved a settlement because she could clear billions of dollars on the sale of Paramount in a deal with Skydance, backed by the billionaire Larry Ellison.

Redstone told The New York Times she was upset by CBS's coverage of Gaza, which she thought was too critical of Israel. To get the settlement, Paramount paid $16 million toward Trump's eventual presidential library and covered his legal costs. Fox News reported later that there was also a "side deal" worth upward of $20 million in free advertising, public service announcements or other programming friendly to Trump.

The New York Times editorialized as the settlement was taking shape: "A settlement would be an extraordinary concession by a major U.S. media company to a sitting president, especially in a case in which there is no evidence that the network got facts wrong or damaged the plaintiff's reputation."

Mark Sableman, a top media lawyer and partner at Thompson Coburn in St. Louis, explained how the media's refusal to settle meritless defamation cases — even at great cost — had shown journalists that worthy reporting would be supported. He wrote in an email:

"For many years, most major news organizations vigorously defended meritless cases, even when the costs of defense were greater than settlement costs. They did so believing that this was the best strategy in the long run. I believe this strategy worked well."

Ironically, even as Redstone was negotiating away CBS's legal defense, "Good Night and Good Luck" was playing on Broadway. It dramatizes Edward R. Murrow's courageous confrontation of Sen. Joseph McCarthy during the Red Scare of the 1950s.

Big law

This past spring Trump issued executive orders directed at New York and Washington law firms he considered unfriendly. Those employing people such as special counsels Jack Smith and Robert Mueller were targeted.

A March executive order, entitled "Preventing Abuses of the Legal System and the Federal Court", targeted lawyers and law firms who had filed "frivolous, unreasonable, and vexatious litigation" against the administration, as judged by the attorney general. The memo and executive orders against individual law firms included revocation of security clearances and preventing any company that uses such a firm from getting federal contracts.

Nine big law firms - mostly from New York - settled with Trump and are providing a total of almost $1 billion in pro bono work. Above the Law, a legal publication, refers to them as the Surrendergate Nine. Four firms - including Perkins Jenner and Wilmer - have contested Trump's order and all four have won in court so far, although the White House is appealing.

Meanwhile the American Bar Association urged everyone in the legal profession to stand up against the Trump's "efforts to undermine the courts and the legal profession" and deans of about 80 law schools signed a joint letter condemning Trump's actions. They said, "Punishing lawyers for their representation and advocacy violates the First Amendment and undermines the Sixth Amendment."

WilmerHale, one of the law firms that challenged the executive orders issued by Trump hired a leading conservative lawyer, Paul Clement, to represent them. Clement said that this case was "absolutely critical to vindicating the First Amendment, our adversarial system of justice, and the rule of law."

In response to the lawsuit, U.S. District Judge Richard Leon issued a temporary restraining order blocking parts of the executive order stating in his opinion that "[t]here is no doubt this retaliatory action chills speech and legal advocacy, or that it qualifies as a constitutional harm."

Big education

Elite universities aren't arguing that WashU and Vanderbilt are guilty of surrender in their formation of the Universities for America's Future. But they do suggest they are giving comfort to the Trump administration's attack on universities where he has used the levers of presidential power to force the payment of huge fines, cut off federal funding and sharply reduce the flow of international students who make up a large part of graduate student bodies.

Gregory P. Magarian, a First Amendment expert and professor on the law faculty with which Martin still is affiliated, would like to see Martin clarify what he means by university neutrality. He thinks the term is empty.

"I understand that universities don't have the same missions as political parties or activist groups," he wrote in an email. "Universities generally avoid wading into partisan politics, among other controversies, and that's appropriate. But the mission of a university entails confronting all sorts of controversies."

Many universities, for example, divested from South African investments during Apartheid, for example. 155 universities had divested from South African companies by 1985 and by 1990, 200 American companies had stopped doing business there - actions that contributed to the fall of Apartheid.

Magarian also says that Martin has enforced a Palestine exception to free speech.

"What we've observed with these Palestine protests measured against any norm of free speech — in the case of public universities, the actual First Amendment — is something that I've rarely seen before," Magarian said last year during congressional hearings on pro-Palestinian protests.

"You've got congressional committees browbeating and driving out of their jobs university presidents for the sin of not punishing students who say things like 'from the river to the sea Palestine will be free.' The notion that that slogan is outside the First Amendment's protection, or outside ordinary norms of free speech, is a completely crazy notion that is textbook day one, free speech stuff. If someone is out on the street yelling 'Kill all the Jews,' that's a different conversation."

This exception is creating a new wave of McCarthyism as too many people are deliberately attempting to weaponize false connections between dissent and terrorism, he said. In addition to the term terrorist and instead of the label of communist, critics are calling pro-Palestine speech and criticism of Israel antisemitic.

"There's a lot of rhetoric from a certain segment of people who support Israel saying, 'If you're participating in these protests, you are a terrorist, or you are a supporter of terrorists,'" he said. "That is functionally identical to [...] being in the 1950s and saying [if you are] expressing commitments to any kind of social or economic egalitarianism, you're a communist."

Courtesy of John McCusker

Photographer John McCusker and Reporter Trymaine Lee talk to a resident while covering Hurricane Katrina.

'We were drowning in neglect'

Katrina reporter reflects on institutional failure

By Jaden Geary

Reporter Trymaine Lee had been living in New Orleans and working as a reporter at The Times-Picayune newspaper for just four months when Hurricane Katrina hit.

At 26 years old, he could not have imagined that one of the deadliest hurricanes in U.S. history was about to pull him into the center of a national crisis.

Lee would soon see the impact of the storm on the city's poorest residents, almost all of whom were Black, from the inside. His work would document their suffering and the government's slow, uncoordinated response. And the tragedy of it all would push him to grow up as a journalist — fast.

"I like to say that in New Orleans, through Katrina, I became a journalist," Lee said. "I was a reporter before then, and going through the experience, I became a journalist. I started to understand the process, the machinery, I started to understand the role that politics plays, the role that the economics of the city plays, the role that race plays."

Lee had volunteered to stay in New Orleans as part of the newspaper's storm coverage. He was young and single and had no one to worry about but himself.

He was initially assigned to work from City Hall and monitor city officials' hurricane preparations and emergency response. But as conditions worsened on Aug. 29, 2005, the city's phone system went down, and he couldn't reach his editors. Suddenly, he was on his own in a city that was quickly flooding.

"Those first couple days I lost contact with the newsroom," he said. "I didn't know where anyone was, and so the only thing I could lean on was just telling the story."

Lee ventured beyond City Hall and just kept reporting, moving between borrowed houses and hotel floors, finding any way he could to document what was happening around him. He did not realize right away that The Times-Picayune's publisher had decided to evacuate the newspaper's building; Lee ran into a few of his colleagues while out reporting and teamed up with them, working from a colleague's house.

"We would just leave there and descend into the city every single day and then come back there and report and write," Lee said.

He became a witness to chaos. Families torn apart. Bodies floating in flood waters. Desperate people stuck in a desperate city.

"The police stations were all flooded out. The grocery stores were all

Courtesy of Ted Jackson

flooded out in those initial days," Lee said. "There were still people trapped in the city, right, and therefore trapped in their homes … folks who couldn't get out."

Lee began to recognize why so many of the people he was seeing at the Superdome and the Convention Center were poor and Black.

"You have especially a large population of poor people who didn't have the resources to get out of town, who couldn't just afford to go somewhere with their credit card and stay in a hotel," Lee said.

Much of the poverty in the city was generational, he said, so there were no out-of-town relatives to welcome them.

"You know, this whole population was very vulnerable," Lee said.

Downtown, Lee met Lucrece Phillips, a woman who had escaped the Lower Ninth Ward when rescuers picked her up in a boat. She told him a harrowing story about seeing many dead bodies, including a seemingly perfect baby who had drowned. Lee's voice cracked as he remembered her words. Phillips' story was cited in the newspaper's winning entry for the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news; the paper also won a Pulitzer for public service that year.

Phillips' story wasn't just tragic, Lee said, but also symbolic of everything the government failed to protect.

"The neglect was as loud as the sirens," Lee said. "We weren't just drowning in water. We were drowning in neglect, in policy failure, in a system that had already written us off long before the levees broke."

Entire neighborhoods were underwater. People waited days in attics, on rooftops and on the second floors of their flooded homes with little or no food or water.

"There were families with small children who hadn't eaten," Lee said. "Folks who talked about bodies that they were seeing of their neighbors, the treatment that they got, describing how they were being treated by the National Guard, as if they were animals, as if they were criminals."

The federal government's response was slow and unorganized. For many of the city's Black residents, Lee said, the message was clear: help wasn't coming for them anytime soon.

The media at the time labeled Black residents seen taking items from flooded stores as looters, not survivors, he said. Law enforcement officers in a neighboring town fired warning shots over the heads of a group of Black residents just trying to escape the city. Lee said he also heard stories of vigilantes patrolling neighborhoods, shooting at anyone they didn't recognize.

"America has never truly cared about poor Black people," he said bluntly.

Lee, who grew up in New Jersey, said the absence of personal connections created its own burden as he navigated the tragedy without local support systems for the trauma he was experiencing.

Hurricane Katrina became a turning point for him. His career took off, and he went on to become a reporter for The New York Times. He now works as a journalist at MSNBC, where he hosts the "Into America" podcast. The show delves into the Black experience in America, exploring how politics, policy and history intersect with everyday lives. Since its launch in February 2020, "Into America" has tackled a range of topics from environmental justice in Louisiana's Cancer Alley to the ongoing fight for reparations.

Lee talks about his time in New Orleans in a new book, "A Thousand Ways to Die: The True Cost of Violence on Black Life in America," set for release in September. He said covering Hurricane Katrina deepened his commitment to telling stories at the intersection of race, injustice and resilience.

"We are people of great fortitude," Lee said of African Americans. "We are people who have survived the unsurvivable."

BEHIND THE LENS

Kathy Anderson

Eighty-six-year-old Irwin Buffet stands in what was left of his living room after Hurricane Katrina. "I lost my home. I lost my car. And all of my friends have moved away," the frail man told Photographer Kathy Anderson. He could see no future. "He died of a broken heart," his daughter said at his funeral 10 months later.

Surviving the storm was a family affair

By Chloe Richmond

The night before Hurricane Katrina touched ground, photographer Kathy Anderson packed up her two daughters, then ages eight and nine, and put the family's storm plan in motion.

Anderson and her husband, Doug Parker, both worked at The Times-Picayune newspaper and had agreed they would ride out a major storm with their girls, Olivia and Alyssa, at their employer's sturdy, three-story concrete and steel building. It had a cafeteria and backup generator, so the girls would be comfortable and safe while their parents worked.

But what Anderson thought would be one or two nights away from home turned into many months of the most unimaginable ordeal. Anderson spent exhausting days and nights photographing the hurricane's devastating impact and faced many tough decisions.

"Over the next several months, I would learn a lesson about the strength of family, the capacity of my children, and the kindness of strangers," Anderson said.

Anderson saw for herself the first signs of Hurricane Katrina's devastation when she made her way to the top of the newspaper building before dawn on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005, one day after the storm hit.

"I climbed up the dark spiral staircase and through a hatch to the top of the newspaper building tower while my daughters slept under the desk of society writer Nell Nolan," Anderson wrote in a 2006 piece, reflecting on the storm. "Frame by frame, I witnessed the city drowning."

Anderson offered the story she wrote as her most vivid recollections of her experience covering Hurricane Katrina. She described returning from the top of the building to an empty newsroom. The publisher had ordered an evacuation and those who had stayed overnight would be transported to Baton Rouge in the newspaper's large delivery trucks.

Anderson landed in a separate truck from her children for the "so very hot eight-hour journey" from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, a drive that usually takes just an hour. She later learned

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AMIDST DISASTER

Courtesy of John McCusker

Photographer John McCusker paddles through the flooded streets of New Orleans in a kayak.

Times-Picayune photographer reflects on how Hurricane Katrina changed his life

By Ella Armstrong

On Sunday, Aug. 28, 2005, photographer John McCusker joined colleagues at The Times-Picayune newspaper in New Orleans to wait out Hurricane Katrina. They had volunteered to cover the storm, and many brought family members along.

McCusker and his wife, Johanna, a reporter, huddled with their 16-year-old son in sleeping bags on the floor. The winds picked up outside, screeching like a baby in distress. But everyone stayed calm, talking about food, playing games and making music. McCusker strummed his 1979 Stratocaster guitar.

For McCusker, this would be the last night of peace for a long time. Hurricane Katrina would bring unprecedented destruction to the hometown he loved and it would break him in unexpected ways.

"The best way to end up putting yourself in a bad place as a journalist, particularly covering trauma, is to think that you're impervious to it," McCusker said. "And I think that's what happened to me."

McCusker and a colleague were among the first journalists to venture into the misty, overcast morning on Aug. 29 after Hurricane Katrina's winds subsided. They rode downtown in his truck, past buildings with glass gone and houses with hanging rooftops.

"That's something we usually don't see, all the glass buildings and everything shattered downtown," McCusker said.

Later that Monday afternoon, McCusker traveled back downtown, and there was nothing but water as far as he could see. At the newsroom that evening, two of his colleagues confirmed that they had seen a neighborhood near the lake was under 12 feet of water, indicating a compromised levee system. Things were getting worse.

"We went to bed that night knowing that our home was probably gone, our pets were probably dead, and a whole lot of our city was never going to be the same," McCusker said.

The next morning, a Tuesday, the newspaper's editor and publisher decided to evacuate the staff and their families out of town to higher ground. The water was rising too high and resources, like food and water, were getting low. The newsroom emptied quickly as people loaded into the backs of the newspaper's big delivery trucks.

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Photographer faces moral dilemmas documenting aftermath of Katrina

By Morgan Auzine

Photographer Ted Jackson stood on an elevated bridge, looked down into the Lower Ninth Ward, and saw four women and their three young children clinging for their lives atop their front porch railing. They were surrounded by water that nearly reached their chests. Jackson had no rope, no boat, nothing to help.

He snapped a photo with his camera, discreetly. But the eyes of one of the women caught the camera, haunting him, begging him to do something.

Jackson left, returned to The Times-Picayune newspaper where he worked, borrowed an inflatable boat and rope and made his way back to help them. By then, the women and children were gone.

This was the first moral challenge Jackson faced while working in the hours after Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans early Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, broke levees and caused floodwaters to swallow most of the city. The line between documenting one of America's deadliest natural disasters and exploiting personal tragedies sat at the forefront of every decision he made. So, after snapping that first image of those people on their porch, he made a decision.

"If I couldn't help them, I didn't take their picture," Jackson recalled.

The next day, Tuesday, he made another decision that would change his life. He had spent the previous two nights in the newsroom with colleagues covering the storm and their family members, but now they had to evacuate in the newspaper's trucks. With flood waters rising, the paper's leaders decided that staying was no longer safe.

"I couldn't make myself get in the back of those trucks," Jackson said. "I told my editor, 'I'm not going.'"

His editor asked what he was going to do.

"I have no idea," Jackson responded. He wasn't trying to be heroic, he said, he just didn't want to lose the ability to make his own choices amid the chaos.

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FAMILY

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that everyone on her family's bus sang "Happy Birthday" to Alyssa, who turned 10 on Aug. 29, and now shares a birthday with Hurricane Katrina.

In Baton Rouge, Bill Feig, then a photographer for The Advocate newspaper, and his family took in Anderson and her family for a few days. Anderson commuted back and forth to New Orleans to work.

"When I drove back into New Orleans in a Humvee with the Army National Guard, my children were having French braids put in their hair by Feig's college student daughters," she wrote.

Throughout the chaos, one constant remained on Anderson's mind: her family. After arriving in Baton Rouge, Anderson talked to her father, who told her that Hurricane Katrina would be her biggest story yet. So, she and Parker agreed to send their daughters to Wisconsin to stay temporarily with one of her sisters.

Anderson's oldest sister, Julie, then flew to Baton Rouge and took the girls to Wisconsin. Anderson and Parker signed paperwork at the airport for Anderson's younger sister, Laurie, to assume temporary guardianship of the children. At 8, Olivia didn't fully understand what was happening — Anderson recalls watching her daughter skip happily through the airport terminal.

Now 27, Olivia said she remembers just feeling the weight of everything unfolding around her.

"I relied heavily on my sister," Olivia said. "I was already the annoying little sister that followed her around, but in Wisconsin it felt like we were a team … I took all my cues from her about my opinions on our new home, how to act and who I was close with."

The girls started school in Wisconsin and stayed connected to their parents through regular phone calls, emails and occasional visits.

"My parents let us make our own email addresses so we could talk to them, which I remember being a really big deal for us," Olivia said.

The sisters experienced their first Wisconsin winter, and their teachers planned special projects about New Orleans.

"We got really close with my Aunt Laurie, who was and still is a saint, and hated disappointing my Uncle Mike when we didn't finish our chores," Olivia said. "We fought and played with our cousins, like siblings, but there was always a presence of otherness. We knew something really bad was happening."

Many times, Anderson considered dropping everything to be with her girls, even if that meant quitting the job she had loved for more than two decades by then. In those times, Anderson's family reassured her that both girls were thriving, making straight A's, playing soccer on the school team and enjoying time with their cousins.

Anderson pushed through and kept working, constantly relocating, sleeping on couches close to the city — and once in a rental car parked outside the Belle Chasse Naval Base. Phones worked only sporadically, making communication difficult at times for work or when Anderson just wanted to hear her girls' voices.

Eventually, Anderson and Parker moved back into their New Orleans house without electricity or gas. Then, on Jan. 15, 2006, the couple flew to Wisconsin to pick up their daughters. New Orleans was just beginning to recover, so the parents second guessed their decision. They were just ready for their family to be whole again.

"When we finally pulled onto our block, three of the neighborhood children that had returned from Virginia and Houston stood with 'Welcome Home' signs," Anderson wrote. "They ran alongside the car screaming like maniacs until we pulled into the driveway, where doors were opened to hugs. A giggling gaggle of girls remained in the backyard the rest of the day."

Anderson and Parker drove their daughters around the city to see the hurricane's aftermath. The girls helped neighbors clean out their homes.

"It was my first true understanding of the importance of community," Olivia recalled.

As spring rolled around, Anderson noticed that she was struggling with her memory — small, mundane things at first, like misplaced items and skipped appointments, until it became more. Therapy helped her work through what was identified as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.

"I always joke that my mom made it harder to get over because she spent several months editing a slideshow of her Katrina pictures to the tune of 'Angel' by Sarah McLachlan, which people already associated with sad puppies in an SPCA commercial," Olivia said.

But the storm helped Olivia appreciate her parents even more.

"The truth is, Katrina also revealed to me how badass my parents are," she said. "They sacrificed so much and made such a deep impact in our city."

Today, Olivia is the director of programming for Rebuilding Together New Orleans, which provides critical home repairs to low-income homeowners. "My entire career is focused on making our community more resilient, and the process of rebuilding less lonely," Olivia said.

In 2010, Anderson, now 67 years old, started her own business, Kathy Anderson Photography, specializing in commercial, portrait and wedding photography. Parker works as a commercial photographer with her.

"I often wonder if living through that experience and witnessing such resilience helped give me the courage to start my own business," Anderson said.

She knows for sure she learned some lessons. "It taught me not to stress over the small stuff, to be resourceful in difficult situations, and to truly value the support of my family, friends and colleagues."

MORAL

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A small, green, flat-bottomed boat had been left on the back steps of the newspaper. Jackson saw an opportunity.

"If there's a motor on that boat, I'm taking it," he thought.

He found only a broken broom in the boat. Good enough. "God has sent me a boat," he thought.

As Jackson watched the trucks pull away with his coworkers, he felt alone and briefly rethought his "scary situation." But he began paddling with that broken broomstick and snapping a few photos. He didn't stop for five hours, all the while working out in his mind other complex situations he might face.

"If someone was begging for help, but they were safe where they were, I'd leave them because I knew help was coming," he recalled thinking. "But if they were in the water desperate, then I would go and get them."

He went back to that moment, looking at the women and children on the porch. He hadn't realized that they were balancing on the railing until he noticed their heads near the top of the front door frame. An elderly man approached to figure out how to help, but neither of them had the right tools. When Jackson stepped back and raised his camera, the stranger, disgusted, turned to face him.

"How could you take a photo of them in a time like this?" he asked sharply.

Jackson replied, "One day I'd like to take you out for a cup of coffee to really explain why I did."

"I will never get a cup of coffee with the likes of you," the man said to him. The memory stung.

Finally, after paddling about five miles from where he began, Jackson's boat ran onto dry land at Causeway Boulevard in suburban Metairie. He walked a few feet and collapsed. As a news photographer at The Times-Picayune since 1984, he was used to long days, but nothing had felt like this. He carried two cameras and a backpack loaded with his laptop, water, food and a cell phone that wasn't connecting. A short while later, he woke up to helicopters overhead. They landed in a nearby staging area, and Jackson was able to board one and get aerial shots of a city under water.

"The city drowned just like that," Jackson recalled. "You didn't know what was coming next, if there was a city left."

From there, Jackson hitched rides on a military dump truck and a rescue boat back to the city. He kept his promise, helping where he could. He ran into a fellow photographer, who gave him a place to sleep.

Two days later, Jackson joined a group of photographers headed to the convention center. They had heard a riot was breaking out. Instead,

REFLECT

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McCusker's wife and son got on one, and McCusker ended up on another. The long, slow caravan snaked its way out of the city. During that journey, McCusker and nine others commiserated and made a stunning decision — they could not leave as the biggest story of their lives unfolded. Certain only that the worst was yet to come, they turned back toward New Orleans.

"All I can do is make a picture, and hopefully it gets out," McCusker explained. "That was the only act of faith we had. That was all we could do."

McCusker had only a couple of camera bags and a change of clothes. Together, the ragtag crew had just a few flasks of water, not even a day's worth, and no food. They stopped at a nearby Walmart, but it was being looted. McCusker grabbed his camera and walked inside.

"It was like an ant hill that had been stepped on," McCusker described. "Except they're walking out with television sets and stereos."

A police officer demanded their press badges. Investigative reporter Michael Perlstein, who was part of the group, recalled seeing the same officers with baskets of electronics.

"It was disconcerting to see that lawlessness, especially by cops," Perlstein added.

Meanwhile, Terri Troncale, the paper's editorial page editor, offered her Uptown apartment as a makeshift office for her colleagues. Her area of town was not yet flooded, and she had some non-perishable food in her pantry.

"I can't remember who all ended up at my house that afternoon," Troncale recalled with a laugh. "But people just went to work."

Without electricity, the team resorted to the basics. Troncale scrounged up notepads, pens and pencils for reporters to write their stories longhand. Neighbors across the street had a working phone and allowed the journalists to use it to contact their bosses, who had set up makeshift newsrooms in Baton Rouge and Houma.

Later that evening, they heard that the entire city might flood, and so McCusker volunteered his mom's house on higher ground on the west bank. She had evacuated but he found a way inside.

Finally, on Friday, after three days of separation, McCusker was able to reach his wife and learned she and their son were staying in Zachary, about one and a half hours from New Orleans, just outside Baton Rouge. When McCusker made it there, Johanna was pacing back and forth, muttering words that were not understandable. McCusker arranged for her and their son to join their two daughters in Birmingham, Alabama.

"This is the woman who had always kept my balloon tethered, so to speak," McCusker explained. "To see her in that way was just one more thing that wasn't right anymore."

McCusker didn't know what else to do but get back to work. While in an airplane capturing aerial shots of the city, he spotted his house. The playhouse he'd built for his kids had floated across the backyard.

"We never had a chance," McCusker said. "The water in our house, from what I could see in the plane, was up to almost the gutters."

Over the next year, storm coverage was never ending, and McCusker found himself "living in people's misery and your own misery every single day."

Johanna and the kids stayed in Alabama, and despite McCusker's regular visits, the distance took a toll on his marriage. When the newspapers' editors summoned workers back to the office, he begged his wife to return and hoped for a triumphant reunion. She refused and lost her job.

Then, one day in August 2006, it all became too much. McCusker remembers only waking up in jail, in restraints, with no idea how he got there. He said he was taking medication that left him in a "non-waking" state. A newspaper report says he was driving recklessly and got in an altercation with a police officer and begged the officer to shoot him.

"It's the most famous thing I ever did, and I don't remember any of it," McCusker said.

McCusker spent a week in a psychiatric inpatient facility and eventually entered an Alford Plea, accepting a sentence without admitting guilt.

"When you think, 'Oh, I've lost everything. I've lost my house, I've lost my wife…' No, you haven't lost everything because now you're in jail," McCusker said. "Now your life is a complete disaster."

For the next three years, McCusker and his family rebuilt their home and tried to rebuild their lives. Then, in March 2010, Johanna, his wife, died of complications from a brain aneurysm.

"I'll still wake up sometimes, half awake, and instinctively reach over," McCusker said. "That never goes away."

Now 62, McCusker lives alone in the city and writes a weekly column for The Times-Picayune. He also has written books about the culture and history of New Orleans. He's learned to let go of the things he can't change, but he still carries a photo of him and the coworkers who stayed in the city at its worst moment.

"I keep that picture there to remind me to keep my head and make good decisions," he said.

they found 30,000 desperate people, begging for help. In that moment Angela Perkins caught Jackson's eyes and camera lens. His ethical dilemma came full circle when she dropped to her knees, crying, praying, screaming: "Help us, please, please!"

Jackson said he knew then he wasn't exploiting her. He was helping her, helping them all.

"She was praying to the world to help through the lens of the camera," he said. "She wasn't praying for me to help her … She was screaming to the world for help."

The pictures alerted the world to the dire state of New Orleans. "The world was shocked because this isn't supposed to happen in America, this level of utter chaos," Jackson said.

After many days of work, Jackson felt depleted, like he could not continue. Then, his phone rang. It was a San Francisco number. His friend, Gary Fong, whom he'd met months earlier at a "Christians in Photojournalism" seminar, was checking on him.

"And I said, 'Gary, I am not OK. We are so messed up down here. I don't know what's going to happen to all of us,'" Jackson recalled.

Fong had called to pray over him — the first time in Jackson's life someone had done that. The prayer flipped a switch, Jackson said, giving him the strength to carry on.

These days, when Jackson and his wife, Nancy, think back to that harrowing time, they see God.

"God was all around us," Nancy Jackson said.

Their suburban home about 45 minutes from the city was spared, despite trees falling all around it.

She also believes God protected her husband and oldest son, Chris, who lived in Mobile, Alabama, but flew into New Orleans with a helicopter search and rescue team and was pulling people from rooftops and trees, as his dad documented the disaster with a camera.

Nancy Jackson said it was her husband's faith that led him to ask the moral questions.

"He has a very close relationship with God," she said. "And so, I know one of the things that he's always struggled with is 'when do I help and when do I shoot?'"

Ted Jackson wondered endlessly what happened to the family on the porch — then, months later, a colleague tracked them down as part of a special project. Jackson talked to them and learned they had been rescued by teenage boys in a fishing boat. They were safe in Houston's Astrodome. Jackson got to tell them he'd left because he thought they would try to push the littlest one to him on a floating log, and he feared she wouldn't make it. He told them he had returned for them in a boat.

They had just one request: that photo. They wanted a tangible reminder of their strength and perseverance.

The reporters who refused to leave their city behind

By Isabella Albertini

They stood gathered in a circle in The Times-Picayune newsroom, photographers, reporters, editors and more, all survivors of the big storm, Hurricane Katrina, ready to stick it out together. Some of their shoes were wet and muddy; most were wearing the same clothes from two days earlier.

Now, it was Tuesday. They had just evacuated, by order of the publisher, from the city in huge newspaper delivery trucks. One truck was parked temporarily on the city's West Bank when reporter Michael Perlstein and his buddy David Meeks stepped out. They looked back at a city mostly submerged under water.

Meeks, an editor at the paper, spoke up. "We're not leaving!"

"This is a story, and we'll cover this properly," Perlstein chimed in.

By then Perlstein had been a news reporter at the paper for almost 20 years. He knew the city, its officials, its policies, its secrets. Now, the city needed him most, and he would tell its story.

Other hands flew up, volunteering to stay and work, uncertain as to how. A photographer. An art critic. An editorial page writer. About nine folks, some of whom barely saw one another in the newsroom, were ready to tackle the toughest assignment of their lives together.

With reluctant permission from their bosses, they climbed back into the truck, with Meeks behind the wheel, and headed back into the city that had given Perlstein, an Air Force kid born in Montgomery, Alabama, more stability than he had ever known.

Perlstein first joined the paper as a graduate student intern and made enough of an impression for editors to bring him back as a reporter after graduation. New Orleans, alive and bustling in the 1980s with its wild politics, colorful culture and robust readership, welcomed the young reporter back. Perlstein believed he'd hit the jackpot with his first job. The percentage of households that got the daily paper was among the highest in the country.

The paper's readers had "tremendous loyalty," Perlstein said.

He covered everything from crime to politics to hurricanes, following Hurricane Andrew to St. Mary's Parish and Hurricane Chantal to Texas. So for him, leaving New Orleans was not an option.

On the crew's first exit along their journey back into the city, they saw a relatively new Walmart with police cars, ambulances and fire trucks parked outside.

"We opened the doors of the Walmart, and that was the first moment when we realized, OK, this is gonna be different," Perlstein recalled. "This is what happens when there are no societal controls, because it was wall-to-wall looting."

Some people filled their carts with water and canned meals. Others took jewelry and electronics, including a police officer with a full basket of electronics.

"We can't control this," the officer said, responding to Perlstein's questions. "It's every man for himself."

The journalists took a poll about whether they could take some much-needed food and water and figure out how to pay for them later. The decision was unanimous — no. They could not take anything; they could just report on what they saw.

With the electricity and phone lines down, Perlstein and the others had to figure out how to get their story to the rest of the team working in a temporary newsroom in Baton Rouge. Fortunately, Editorial Page Editor Terri Troncale's Uptown apartment was on a sliver of dry land, so they ended up there. She made everyone peanut butter and jelly sandwiches when they arrived.

"It was kind of, in a weird way, almost normal," Troncale said. "It was odd, but not super stressful."

Troncale's neighbors, an elderly couple, still had a landline phone that worked. So, Perlstein and his colleagues used it to call the team in Baton Rouge and dictate the looting story.

> **"The spirit of the people was so powerful that I think we just decided we can't turn our backs on the city when it's down. You know, the city needs us. We have to be part of this rebuilding."**
>
> **— Michael Perlstein**

"It was just a crazy time," Perlstein said. "It was hard to be organized because we just didn't know the full scope of destruction and flooding."

That night, in Troncale's house, the team heard from other journalists that the mayor had said water was still flowing into the city and that the entire city might flood. Believing they were no longer safe, the group voted to move to the home of a colleague's mother. The house sat on higher ground on the west bank of the Mississippi River in the Algiers neighborhood.

After that first night, Perlstein and the other reporters went back into the city, where they stayed, finding places to sleep after reporting all day. They reported on the harsh conditions for residents who had evacuated to the Superdome or at the last moment, the convention center.

"People who were getting fished out of the water had no place to go and started going to the convention center," Perlstein said. About 25,000 to 30,000 evacuees ended up there with "no way to escape New Orleans or drive out of the city."

The storm team saw people passing out on the sidewalks under the scorching August heat. They had no food, water or connection to the outside world.

"There was no organization of evacuation buses," Perlstein said. "And so that became a huge story."

The constant sound of helicopters overhead added "a war-like intensity," Perstein added.

Perlstein and The Times-Picayune team would go on to win two Pulitzer Prizes for their work in the days, weeks and months after Hurricane Katrina. Slowly, the city that almost drowned came back to life. Perlstein's wife and three children returned from Milwaukee, where they had evacuated. The damage to their home was repaired. Other residents trickled back and started fixing their homes, too. A few stores reopened.

"The spirit of New Orleans, you know, this sort of survival spirit of resilience, if you want to call it that, really kicked in," Perlstein said.

Both he and his wife were offered jobs in Milwaukee, but they declined.

"The spirit of the people was so powerful that I think we just decided we can't turn our backs on the city when it's down," Perlstein recalled. "You know, the city needs us. We have to be part of this rebuilding."

Twenty years later, Perlstein remains in New Orleans. His career took a turn into teaching for a few years at Loyola University, and then he joined WWL-TV as an investigative reporter, jumping "over to the dark side, as I call it, to TV-land," he said, laughing.

He still loves his work. "I've always said to this day, all these years later, journalism beats working for a living."

Courtesy of Michael Perlstein

Reporter Michael Perlstein's children, Max, Eli, and Jackie, stand in the Lower Ninth Ward in the weeks after Hurricane Katrina. The storm destroyed the neighborhood, reducing it mostly to foundations and empty lots. The area saw a sign of life when pink geometric installations popped up, marking the future locations of Actor Brad Pitt's "Make It Right" houses.

Art critic transformed after reporting on the Katrina floods

By Noah Martin

Doug MacCash was a full-time art critic for The Times-Picayune in New Orleans when weather forecasters began predicting that a potentially deadly Category 5 hurricane was heading towards the city. So when he volunteered to ride out the storm in the newspaper's office and help with the coverage, he wasn't sure what to expect.

But on Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, just hours after the winds from Hurricane Katrina died down and out-of-town news stations began broadcasting that New Orleans had dodged the worst-case scenario, MacCash and a newspaper colleague would soon discover the shocking truth: the city's protective levee system had been compromised, neighborhoods were quickly flooding and the city was heading for a major disaster.

"We were so unaware that I waited until 1:00 in the afternoon for my editor and friend James O'Byrne to finish editing for the next day's paper," MacCash said.

As they left on their bikes to investigate the damage, MacCash thought Hurricane Katrina had been like a typical Southern Louisiana storm. So, too, did O'Byrne.

"We were very confident that it had been a windstorm and not a flood," O'Byrne said.

It was common after tropical storms for MacCash and O'Byrne to navigate the debris-ridden streets on their bikes; cars faced way more roadblocks.

"James and I both brought our bicycles," MacCash said. "The highway was empty. The town had been evacuated for a day or two."

Around 2 p.m. that Monday, the pair started riding towards Lakeview, O'Byrne's neighborhood, located near Lake Pontchartrain. It was one of the lowest areas of the city. They wound up on an elevated railroad track.

"While we were on top of the railroad tracks … we became aware that there was not just standing water but water rushing through the street," MacCash said.

It looked like a lake with beer coolers flowing through. This wasn't conventional street flooding — highways were disappearing into the sea. They then realized Hurricane Katrina wasn't the normal storm they expected.

"It was a pinch yourself situation," MacCash said.

As they traveled through Lakeview, passing groups of stranded people, both knew O'Byrne had likely lost everything that wasn't in his attic.

"We knew in that moment, around 3:30 in the afternoon on Monday, August 29th, while everyone is reporting that the city is dodging a bullet, Doug and I knew that the city would go under water," O'Byrne said.

MacCash's wife and two children had left town, but he thought of his mother, who had decided to stay behind in her storm-proof apartment building.

"I warned her that it was going to be very hot, and she would get bored before it was all over," MacCash said, "I had to wonder if she was surrounded by water, and she was, in the end."

Courtesy of Doug MacCash

Art Critic Doug MacCash saw an artistic revival in New Orleans about three years after Hurricane Katrina. Young people began wrapping their cars in colorful vinyl that looked like ads. He believes it was part of New Orleans' cultural instinct for costuming.

MacCash and O'Byrne approached different neighborhoods with the same sad issue. There were islands made of shingled roofs. People were stuck, surrounded by water, with nowhere to go.

"We ran into neighbors who believed that maybe one of their neighbors, who was wheelchair-bound, had been caught in the flood," MacCash said. "It is a helpless feeling."

All they felt they could do was report on the situation and hope these people would be helped. The stranded were shouting at him from rooftops but he had to keep moving. Soon, though, rescuers showed up, seemingly from nowhere.

This kind of reporting was different for MacCash. He had been an art critic, not the kind of reporter who went into traumatizing situations and reported on them. But he had to embrace it.

"I was aware that we were seeing things that the rest of the city, the rest of the country, had to know, and at the same time, you have the instinct of thinking you should be doing something more immediate," MacCash said. "We did not dissolve into emotion immediately. It was a numbing disaster."

It took time for the enormity of the catastrophe to sink in.

"We realized that this isn't something that's gonna be swept up by that evening, and it hit me that this is a disaster unfolding," MacCash said.

The city has changed since overcoming Katrina, MacCash said, and he changed, too — he became a journalist. To MacCash, his transformation was reminiscent of the end of "The Wizard of Oz" when the Tin Man received a diploma. He had a brain but needed a diploma.

"Until that point, I had been a critic, but maybe not a journalist per se," MacCash said. "But by the Friday after Katrina, I was a journalist for real."

The culture of New Orleans didn't wash away into the Gulf, he said. The city eventually emerged with a new feeling — a feeling of resurrection and new life. MacCash believes that three years after Hurricane Katrina both art and the people were revitalized.

He said 2008 saw an artistic revival. "It became this great creative place, great creative outpouring."

People were wondering if the carnival culture would live on after the storm. But that year young people embraced cultural expression, sometimes wrapping their entire cars in vinyl.

"It looked as though they had wrapped their car as advertisements for Lemonhead candy or Flamin' Hot Cheetos, or you name it," MacCash said. "In my view, it was New Orleans' instinct for costuming that had somehow translated into car culture."

It was just a year before the New Orleans Saints won the Super Bowl. The city was in a new form, with new people and those who had stuck it out through the travesty, MacCash said. New Orleans was on its way to being whole again.

‘We were just trying to do the job and survive’

By Tyler Harden and Mariah Cannon

Inside The Times-Picayune newsroom, Paula O’Byrne, then the paper’s copy desk chief, was editing stories in the dark as Hurricane Katrina exited the city Aug. 29, 2005. She and a skeleton crew had ridden out the storm inside the building and prepared for another long hurricane shift. What she didn’t know was that the city was beginning to drown.

Outside, two journalists were mounting a mission that would reshape headlines and help the paper sound the alarm. Features Editor James O’Byrne, who nine years after the storm married Paula, and Art Critic Doug MacCash got on their bicycles and pedaled north. Their goal was to check on the lower-lying neighborhoods, near Lake Pontchartrain, including their own.

They rode onto Interstate 10, toward the Lakeview neighborhood with its framed cottages and ranch-style homes.

When they reached a deep dip in the highway, they stopped abruptly. It was under water. A firetruck pulled up. Two firefighters got out, cut a hole in the fence leading to the elevated railroad and went through to check out their own houses. James O’Byrne and MacCash pitched their bikes over the fence and went through, too. They walked the railroad with their bikes until they reached Lakeview and looked down.

The entire neighborhood was under about 12 feet of water and a heavy flow was headed toward downtown and the French Quarter.

“That’s kind of your ‘holy shit’ moment,” James O’Byrne said. “Lakeview is underwater. That means the walls or the levees are down somewhere. What it meant was the entire city was going to fill up.”

James O’Byrne, then 45, with more than two decades of hard news reporting and editing experience, became an on-the-ground reporter again. He and MacCash said they were two of the first journalists to find out that New Orleans was not in the clear of greater devastation.

“When everyone was reporting the core of the city had dodged a bullet, Doug and I knew most of the city would go under water,” said James O’Byrne, who lived in the Lakeview neighborhood. “The only other people who knew that were all the people in Lakeview who were trying to get out of their houses and get somewhere onto dry land.”

The two reporters learned that a similar scene was playing out in the Lower Ninth Ward — a seawall had been breached — and people were scrambling into attics and onto rooftops, or had been swept to their deaths in the water. They would soon discover how extensive the devastation was.

James O’Byrne’s family had evacuated to Shreveport, a city in northern Louisiana, while he stayed behind to help report on the storm. His first effort in that help was bringing his bike to work.

“I figured if the water got high, as it often did in New Orleans anyway, it would be easier to get around the city on a bicycle than it would be to get around the city in a car,” James O’Byrne said.

The two documented everything they could. James O’Byrne’s digital camera batteries died mid-reporting, but a local man offered to help. He swam back to his flooded house and returned minutes later with fresh AA batteries, enabling the first images of Lakeview’s destruction to be captured and shared.

“You’d be surprised how you have to convince yourself that you’re seeing what you’re seeing,” MacCash recalled.

Back in the newsroom, Paula O’Byrne and her team were tearing up the front page and starting over. “We destroyed the front page and started from scratch,” she said. Working on power from the paper’s generator, the team edited stories and posted updates online. The next day, the newsroom itself had to evacuate on the backs of delivery trucks with only moments to spare.

The Advocate in Baton Rouge offered temporary space in a former shopping mall with no equipment or supplies. James O’Byrne asked the IT technician if he had a credit card. He did, and O’Byrne sent him into the night to buy $30,000 worth of computers and software from Best Buy to rebuild a newsroom from the ground up.

Courtesy of James O’Byrne

Floodwater from the 17th Street Canal breach flows down Canal Boulevard on the edge of the Lakeview neighborhood, headed toward downtown New Orleans and the French Quarter, on the afternoon of Aug. 29, 2005. Reporter James O’Byrne, who snapped the photo, called this “the holy shit moment” that confirmed most of the city would go under water.

Paula O’Byrne wasn’t just editing the biggest story of her career; she was living it. The flood destroyed the first floor of her Lakeview home. Her three cats had been left behind in hopes that the second floor would offer them safety. The guilt, she said, was overwhelming.

A week later, James O’Byrne and a colleague launched a rescue mission. They strapped a canoe to a rented Jeep and returned to Lakeview. Navigating the flooded neighborhood, James entered through a window. All three cats had survived. But during the chaotic rescue, one bit James’s finger; the injury developed into Compartment Syndrome and required surgery.

“This is easily the stupidest thing we’ve ever done,” James O’Byrne later said, recalling the downed power lines, debris and lack of cell service.

But to Paula O’Byrne, the gesture meant everything. “He did more than just save the cats,” she said. “He saved a part of me.”

The two were colleagues at the time, each married to someone else. The storm changed everything. Both lost their homes and, eventually, their marriages. “When I asked her to marry me,” James O’Byrne said, “she had to say yes because I rescued her cats.”

The O’Byrnes have now been married for 10 years. They are retired and live in a small village in the French countryside.

Both journalists look back on Katrina as the defining moment of their careers — and their lives. “We were just trying to do the job and survive,” Paula O’Byrne said. “But we were also recording history.”

For James O’Byrne, the lesson was lasting. He no longer chases material possessions. “A person can carry experiences forever,” he said.

There was some public debate nationally about whether New Orleans should be rebuilt, but the newspaper fought hard for the city with truthful stories that held public officials accountable.

“We had a lot of passion,” Paula O’Byrne recalled. “It was hard to keep your distance; we knew this city had a right to survive.”

Courtesy of Jarvis DeBerry

Editorial Writer Jarvis DeBerry stands in front of his home, which was nearly submerged by eight feet of water during Hurricane Katrina.

Katrina made editorial writer realize the power of his voice

By Kate Beske

Jarvis DeBerry bought his home in New Orleans the year before weather forecasters warned that a Category 5 hurricane was headed for the city.

On Sunday, Aug. 28, 2005, DeBerry, an editorial writer, boarded up his house and joined colleagues at the Times-Picayune newspaper to wait out the storm together.

The next morning, Hurricane Katrina ripped through New Orleans, causing historic flooding, loss of lives and property destruction. DeBerry's neighborhood, Filmore, located in the center of the city, would experience significant flooding and his home would be among the storm's casualties.

But he had a job to do, and before he knew for sure his home had been destroyed, DeBerry said he let the thought go.

By the time Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the early morning hours of Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, its power had lessened to a Category 3. When the winds died down enough later that afternoon, two groups of journalists, including Jarvis, boarded a couple of the paper's newspaper delivery trucks and headed out into the city to survey the damage.

One truck left a few minutes before DeBerry's group. But as DeBerry's truck rounded the curve of Interstate 10 at the Superdome, he saw the other group already heading back toward the newspaper. With no other vehicles on the road, the trucks were traveling on the same side of the interstate and pulled up next to each other.

DeBerry heard his driver ask the other why he was turning back. The first driver explained that the base of "the high rise," the highest point of the interstate, was under water, and he couldn't get through. DeBerry's driver soon realized the same, turned back and stopped on an elevated section of the interstate near the Superdome. The journalists got out of the truck and looked down. DeBerry noticed the city was starting to flood.

"The most enduring sight is this man who has his arms thrown over a water cooler, the type of water coolers that you see in the little league dugout, like the orange one that's cylindrical, and that's when I knew that people were in physical danger," DeBerry said.

The group noticed a house where about 12 people, including a pregnant woman, were surrounded by water. In the distance, DeBerry saw buildings on fire. Standing there, he thought of his own home and uttered that it was probably gone.

"I said it to try to free myself of the anguish of wondering what might have happened to my house and to try to remain laser-focused on the job ahead," DeBerry recalled.

It didn't sink in until a few years ago, while he was being interviewed for a documentary, that DeBerry realized he may have been witnessing the final moments of the people he saw as he looked down at the flood waters that day.

In the hours after the storm, the magnitude of the damage was still unclear. When DeBerry's truck returned to the newspaper's building, the streets around it were mostly dry and the area looked to him like the typical aftermath of a serious New Orleans thunderstorm, with trees down, branches everywhere and spotty flooding.

DeBerry wrote a short blog update about a service station on Franklin Avenue that was completely underwater. He figured the station was a landmark for people who knew the area and might give them an understanding of the condition of their own houses. At that point, there was no loyalty to staff members' previous roles at the newspaper, DeBerry said. Many staff members, like him, were writing blog posts for the first time, giving punchy updates, contributing in every way they could.

"I can tell you that the very first thing I wrote after the storm passed, perhaps seems rather unremarkable, but I think it's telling to kind of redefine the role I was in at that time," he said.

As the staff was putting together the paper later that day, DeBerry saw the one-word headline: "Catastrophic." The subhead mentioned that a levee breach "threatens to flood the entire city." He believed this was an exaggeration at first.

Then, around 6 in the morning, Tuesday, Aug. 30, a staff member woke up her husband, a photographer, effectively waking everyone in the room. Hurry and grab the camera, she told him.

"So we all rushed to the windows, and as far as we could see, there's water. It's now like we are sitting in the middle of a lake," DeBerry said.

Shortly after, Publisher Ashton Phelps decided the staff needed to evacuate the building. No one knew how high the water would rise. Staff members and some of their relatives loaded onto the trucks, headed to higher ground. DeBerry believed the trucks would stop once they crossed the Mississippi River to the city's West Bank for editors to figure out a plan. He saw one truck stop there, but his driver kept going until it reached Baton Rouge.

Once there, DeBerry wrote an angry editorial responding to then-Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert after he questioned if New Orleans should be rebuilt. DeBerry said Hastert's remarks were made while people were still on their rooftops and in the water, drowning. There may have been no appropriate time to raise that idea, he said, but to do so while people were dying and waiting for rescue seemed especially callous. Hastert's remarks reflected an attitude that seemed to be spreading across the country, that the people of New Orleans should have known better than to live in that city, which is mostly below sea level, and deserved what they got, DeBerry said.

He also wrote the editorial, "An open letter to the President," which was a plea for help in New Orleans.

"If I leave New Orleans, where the hell I'm going to be after that?

His editor at the time, Terri Troncale, proposed the idea. She had been on the truck that returned to the city when the staff was evacuated that Tuesday. And she stayed four days before heading to Baton Rouge. Troncale said she shared with DeBerry her frustration about the federal government's lack of response and excuses. The two decided the editorial would be more impactful if it directly addressed the president.

"That's one of the editorials that I'm most proud that we ever did, of all the work we did, because it was such an important moment for so many people who were being, if not completely ignored, not fully supported by the government, and it was just wrong," Troncale said.

DeBerry rode back into New Orleans during the first week of September to help with reporting. By then, city officials were putting residents who had stayed in the city onto buses headed out of town without telling them where they were going. DeBerry encountered a man in the Tremé neighborhood who had refused to leave.

"If I leave New Orleans, where the hell I'm going to be after that?" the man said.

DeBerry took his question existentially, as if he were questioning who he was outside this city. It felt like a rebuttal to those who said the city shouldn't be rebuilt. It summarized what so many people in the city were feeling.

DeBerry said Hurricane Katrina made him reconsider the notion of objectivity for the first time because most of the staff were victims of the storm as they reported on it. They couldn't be unbiased and objective. All phone lines were down, so some staff members didn't know where their loved ones were and feared they had drowned in their houses, he said. DeBerry's parents and sister were in Mississippi, trying to reach him to no avail.

"I think what was so remarkable about the coverage is that we were all doing it during perhaps the worst week of our lives," he said. "So you can't just look at the coverage like 'oh those reporters are so great.' If you situate the reporters and their own predicament, then it becomes even more remarkable."

The first paper The Times-Picayune printed after the hurricane was on Friday, Sept. 2, 2005, and editors decided to distribute it to people at the New Orleans Convention Center, which had become an impromptu shelter for people rescued from their homes. Everyone there had been in a news blackout for five days.

DeBerry said he initially grumbled when he learned Mayor Ray Nagin had given a New York Times reporter access to City Hall. But after the storm, he realized that having access to city officials wasn't what the paper's readers most needed. This reshaped the way he thought about what readers needed and his responsibility to them. His job wasn't to have access to a public official or write sterling prose — it was to get people the information they needed when they needed it. And he learned to appreciate the power of his own voice.

"I had been writing opinion pieces for several years, and I don't want to suggest that I was unserious in all the years before Katrina struck," DeBerry said, "but I will say that I did not truly appreciate the platform that I had, and I did not truly understand my role and my duty as opinion writer."

He wasn't just writing for himself, but for the readers. Journalists will lose their way if they don't focus on their readers, he said. It is important to remember Hurricane Katrina, not just as an historically bad hurricane, but as one that "shattered lives, destroyed families, destroyed possessions, destroyed futures."

Covering Katrina made DeBarry take the profession a lot more seriously, he said, in that "this is not just a job, this is not just something I do for a check, but this is something that has great impact, and sometimes a life and death impact on the people who read the journalism.

"And if we did anything to help people understand that," he said, "then I think we did our part."

Courtesy of Jarvis DeBerry

The words written on this New Orleans home, damaged by Hurricane Katrina, express a sentiment widely felt by many who saw their dreams washed away by the storm.

Journalist's home becomes refuge for colleagues with nowhere to work

By Chandler Johnson

The day before the big storm, Terri Troncale packed two small suitcases, one for her clothes and one for keepsakes that she didn't want to lose, just in case the worst happened.

"My mother had passed the year before, so I had taken some of her jewelry," Troncale recalled.

But Troncale was not leaving New Orleans. She was heading to The Times-Picayune headquarters, where she worked as the editorial page editor. As a journalist, she was expected to report to work, even during a hurricane.

The night before the storm, no one knew what to expect.

"We played cards. We just kind of killed time," she said of the staff members and their relatives who joined her in the newsroom. "We all slept just on the floor. People brought air mattresses and sleeping bags. I slept in the library … between stacks because the publisher told us not to sleep by the windows in case the windows started blowing out."

She woke up the next day around 5 in morning to Hurricane Katrina ravaging the city. "The storm was at full force at that point, or felt like it was, " Troncale said. The power was out, but generators kept the lights low.

Katrina brought Category 3 winds, rain and then, when the levees breached, massive flooding. The storm rewrote the Crescent City's history, and some of Troncale's, too.

It stirred within her a strong determination. When the publisher ordered an evacuation of the newsroom, she not only joined a cadre of journalists who stayed in the city — a stroke of good fortune also enabled her to provide them an impromptu base of operations.

When the water across the city started rising, Troncale sought out to move her Volkswagen Beetle to higher ground, but like so many things in New Orleans after the storm, the car would be reduced to a mere memory, swamped by floodwaters that showed no mercy.

When the paper's publisher evacuated everyone later that morning, everyone left the last place they knew was safe, not knowing if their homes and possessions had been spared. Large news delivery trucks quickly filled with people from the newsroom.

"It was a really tricky moment because the water came up to the top of the wheels on these huge trucks," said Troncale. "I was afraid that maybe the trucks were going to not be able to make it."

After clearing the floodwaters, some of the news trucks stopped when they made it across the Mississippi River to higher ground on the city's west bank so editors could plan. Troncale, who joined the staff in 1996, and others decided to return. If she were going to write opinions about the devastation of the city that she had come to love, she wanted to see it for herself.

"We didn't know when we could get back in if we left," Troncale said. "We didn't know how we would cover the story if there was nobody in the city."

Troncale's apartment sat on fairly high ground far from the levees, so she suggested the team try to make it there. As she guessed, her neighborhood was dry and her apartment untouched by flooding.

Her group included Dante Ramos, deputy editorial page editor; David Meeks, sports editor; Keith Spera, music writer; Brian Thevenot, education reporter; Mike Perlstein, police reporter; Bruce Nolan, religion editor; and John McCusker, photographer. Another reporter, Trymaine Lee, who also had stayed in the city, later would join them.

With a bit of food from her pantry — peanut butter and jelly, tuna and whatever else they could find — they made the apartment work. With only notebooks and pens, they wrote stories by hand. They borrowed a landline phone that belonged to Troncale's elderly neighbors to call in those stories to their colleagues, some of whom were also stationed in Houma, Louisiana. Unsure whether water would continue to pour into the city, the journalists moved again later that evening to the west bank home of a photographer's parents.

When they traveled into the city the next day, Wednesday, the streets were eerily bare with police officers nowhere in sight.

"When we came in from the West Bank and came down Tchoupitoulas Street, which is a very long street that runs along the river and to my apartment, we didn't see a single police officer or a police car," Troncale said.

Without their usual channels of communication, the journalists tracked down leads by word of mouth. It was hard to decipher what was true.

"We heard a rumor that Children's Hospital was under attack, so we sent a reporter," Troncale said. "That wasn't true. There was a lot of anxiety, you know, that people were under such stress and everything, that I just wonder if they just started imagining all these bad things happening."

Stories surfaced about people on their rooftops, and others who never made it out of their homes, particularly the elderly. They haunted Troncale.

"It's just heartbreaking to think of people who are in their homes, water starts coming up. They go into the attic. They even go onto the rooftops, and they can't escape it," she said. "I'll never forget that."

Reporter bought house for co-workers covering Hurricane Katrina

By Zak Tuminello

As Hurricane Katrina's howling winds died down on Aug. 29, 2005, relief fell over The Times-Picayne newsroom. Reporter John Pope, who had spent the night there with colleagues and their family members, believed the worst was over.

But Pope, the paper's health and medicine reporter at the time, got a call from an employee of Mercy Hospital asking why Bayou St. John, an adjacent waterway, was overflowing. Two of Pope's colleagues, who had left on bikes to see what was happening, also returned with shattering news: the levees were breaking.

New Orleans was drowning.

"At that point it stopped being another hurricane," Pope said.

Hurricane Katrina would go down in history as one of the country's worst natural disasters, and The Times-Picayune would earn two Pulitzer Prizes for its coverage. But in the uncertain days after the storm, Pope would do far more than write stories and blog posts. He would go to the extreme to provide shelter for colleagues whose lives were unraveling as they worked.

"John Pope was one of the heroes in Baton Rouge," Kenny Harrison, a Times-Picayune feature design editor and longtime friend, said.

Baton Rouge is where Pope and many of the journalists who had stayed in the city to help cover the storm ended up after they were evacuated in the back of newspaper delivery trucks the day after the storm.

"Don't let anyone tell you riding in a delivery truck in South Louisiana in late August is fun," Pope said. "It isn't."

The traveling journalists found emergency refuge in an Louisiana State University apartment for married students, which Pope said "could break up more marriages than infidelity." It had air conditioning in just one room, so the crew slept on mattresses spread on the floor and kept all doors open to stay cool, at the cost of enduring heavy-snoring colleagues.

The team initially worked out of LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication and kept long, grueling hours, covering everything they thought could help. Their blog posts got over a million hits.

They then relocated to a mostly abandoned shopping center they nicknamed "The Bunker," where they worked at long tables with laptops and cellphones. When time permitted, they called family, insurance companies and contractors. Many suffered breakdowns during those calls.

"Every night I talked to my wife," Pope said. "That's what got me through."

His wife, Diana Pinckley, had evacuated with friends to Mississippi.

When Pope and his co-workers began looking for another place to stay, a writer friend gave him the name of a Baton Rouge realtor, who told him about a four-bedroom house that was in succession and had not yet been listed for sale. The electricity, cable and water were all still connected. It sounded perfect.

"So four days after I evacuated with a gym bag full of underwear and an umbrella, and not much else, I was negotiating for a house for myself and my colleagues," Pope said.

He bought the house, which he dubbed "The Pope Home for Vagabond Journalists." It gave a temporary place to stay for his colleagues and their families who had lost their homes in the storm. Eight adults, one teen and "one anxious cat" moved in.

Harrison was among them — his home had flooded, and after moving from Lake Charles to Houston, he ended up in a closet in the Pope Home in the "second wave" of inhabitants. Harrison eventually upgraded to a room, and his family, including his teenage son, joined him.

Harrison and Pope, who'd been jogging partners since 1980, took to the track at nearby Broadmoor High School to take a break from work and blow off steam. The chaos of their lives gave birth to the team's slogan, which made it onto a T-shirt: "We publish come hell and highwater."

His wife, Pinckley, visited Pope at the house twice. He told her he didn't know how much longer he could keep working. "You're not allowed to say that," she told him. "The hardest part is just beginning."

Pinckley, a communications strategist, would discover that much of the property in the 9th Ward had been passed down among relatives without a paper trail or documents for insurance. That would make rebuilding more difficult for many poor and working class residents, many of whom were among the hardest hit by the hurricane. Pinckley also would join Women of the Storm, a group of diverse New Orleans women who traveled to Washington to lobby Congress to support the city.

Six months after buying the house, Pope sold it and gave its donated kitchenware to his co-worker and friend, Karen Bazile. Unlike Pope's house in Carrollton, which had just one broken window pane, Bazile's house in St. Bernard Parish took in nine feet of water. One red pot Bazile received, dubbed the "John Pope Pot of Love," is still in use.

Stress battered the displaced, overworked reporters. One man woke up believing he was suffering a heart attack after a call with his wife about where to enroll their child in school; it was a panic attack. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma came to offer support.

After about six weeks, Pope was invited to speak at Harvard's Nieman Foundation about the stress of covering the storm. He broke down three times but finished to a standing ovation.

"That's when it just really hit me," Pope recalled. "I remember saying, 'I don't know when I'll again be able to hear Irma Thomas and the Neville Brothers or get a good, sloppy roast beef poboy, or use an ATM or pump gas.'"

Pope was invited back twice.

The following April, when the two Pulitzers were announced, everyone in the newsroom hugged, jumped up and down and cried. The awards came with crystal mementos from Tiffany & Co., but Pope couldn't look at his for four months without crying.

Eventually, the chaos subsided. Pope returned home to New Orleans and began giving Hurricane Katrina tours.

"My car was practically on autopilot," he said.

Some places along the route proved to be too much, even years later. Sites like one in the 9th Ward, where a young girl was swept away and drowned in rushing floodwaters, continued to cause breakdowns in Pope.

His wife, Pinckley, died in 2012, three years before the publication of his book, "Getting Off at Elysian Fields," a collection of 123 obituaries and four funerals. Over his long career, Pope has written many big-name obituaries, including those of musician Fats Domino, Popeye's founder Al Copeland and the "Queen of Creole Cuisine" Leah Chase. He is a member of The Society of Professional Obituary Writers, who push each other to write the best obituaries.

Pope has co-authored two more books and continues writing, travelling, speaking and listening. On Hurricane Katrina's fifth anniversary, he even caught President Barack Obama's order at Parkway Bakery (shrimp po' boys for himself and the First Lady, burgers for their daughters and an order of alligator gumbo).

Twenty years have passed, but some remnants of the storm remain with him, like his uneasiness at the sight of rain clouds. He pauses and reminds himself, "Pope, it's only rain."

It angered her that the federal government was nowhere to be found. That the Federal Emergency Management Agency was claiming it couldn't get into the city. That New Orleans had been left behind to drown in neglect, confusion and silence.

"They were just completely inept," Troncale said of FEMA. "I think that they were just completely lacking in understanding of what was needed."

After several days, Troncale left for Baton Rouge, where a larger group of her colleagues had set up shop. Filled with rage, she knew someone had to speak for the city. She turned to Editorial Writer Jarvis DeBerry and asked him to write the piece because she could not channel her anger into words.

The editorial "Dear Mr. President" was published the Sunday after Hurricane Katrina and quickly gained national attention. CNN read it on air, and the headline "Times-Picayune publishes angry editorial" appeared across its ticker.

Troncale recalled thinking, "Damn straight we were angry!"

DeBerry's goal was to get action. "I'm glad I wrote that editorial," he said. "I think it needed to be written, but I think the most important thing is that it was an attempt to get help for people who needed it, and that that's the real value of it."

At the same time, members of Congress began questioning whether New Orleans should be rebuilt. This made Troncale want to fight harder for the city to bounce back.

"It was a man-made disaster," she said. "The levees we thought would protect us did not protect us. If they had been maintained the way they should've been, we wouldn't have had this massive disaster."

GUIDING THE STORM

Three editors, one city's story

Inside the Times-Picayune news operation, three editors shaped the coverage of Katrina

MANUEL TORRES

New bureau chief paused his promotion to report firsthand on Katrina

By Isabella Avila

In late August 2005, Manuel Torres got a big promotion from staff writer to bureau chief of a Times-Picayune office just outside New Orleans. He had worked his way up and was ready to lead and mentor other reporters.

However, just one week later Torres would find himself back working as a reporter, covering the biggest assignment of his life — Hurricane Katrina.

The storm would overtake not just New Orleans, but also St. Bernard Parish, the suburban jurisdiction where Torres was to shepherd news coverage in his new role. Located just beyond the Lower Ninth Ward, St. Bernard would be among the hardest hit areas in the metropolitan area.

Torres and his wife had just bought a house in the area but had not yet moved in when Hurricane Katrina struck. The house took in 14 feet of water — three and a half feet of which were on the second floor. But Torres remained focused, resilient and dedicated to his duty in the face of disaster.

"Covering a story as extensive as this was an experience," he said. "We all learned the strength of our own character, the resilience we had, and I'm always going to be proud of it."

Just a week before the storm hit, Torres was transitioning into his new job. He and his coworkers kept an eye on weather forecasts about a terrible storm heading for the Gulf. At the time, Hurricane Katrina was forecast to hit Florida, but by Saturday, Aug. 27, 2005, things changed, Torres said.

Torres' wife, Kem Opperman-Torres, had just put their 2-year-old to bed and sat down in her recliner to tend to their 6-month-old and watch the news. She turned on the television and said she had an "oh-my-God moment."

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John McCusker

People walk through the flood waters on Canal Street in downtown New Orleans.

PETER KOVACS

Times-Picayune managing editor led Katrina coverage, fought false narratives

By Martin Sullivan

Peter Kovacs woke up at 5 a.m. in the newsroom of The Times-Picayune newspaper the day after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. He'd overheard that flood water was about to enter the building.

Kovacs had slept on an air mattress on the newsroom floor with about 250 coworkers, family members and pets as part of the paper's hurricane coverage plan.

The storm had brought down trees, cut power, exploded car windshields and even burst a bulletproof window at their building. Water lapped against the top step in a pattern that indicated more was coming. Staying was futile.

"Everyone's together in the cafeteria," Kovacs said. "The publisher, the head of the whole company, says, 'We're leaving, and everyone has five minutes to get in these trucks, and they're leaving whether you're in them or not.'"

Kovacs, then the paper's managing editor, had covered his share of hurricanes throughout his 22 years at the paper. None were like this. He evacuated to Baton Rouge, working mostly from Louisiana State University, covering the fallout of what was then considered the greatest natural disaster in the country in a century. He, along with his team, documented it and, at times, debunked wild rumors about the happenings in the Crescent City in its darkest hour.

The Friday before the storm, Aug. 26, 2005, no one anticipated what was to come.

Returning to the office after a farewell lunch for one of his reporters, Kovacs found the latest projection of the hurricane's path printed out on his desk.

"The Hurricane Center decided it was coming to Louisiana, and it was gonna be the nuclear version," Kovacs said. "The day before, it was going to go to Florida."

The next morning, Kovacs' wife and two sons headed for Memphis, and he went to the newsroom.

A hurricane plan was already in place.There was a designated room for pets, another for movie nights for the kids and volunteers were bringing food. The newspaper's sturdy building had been constructed in the 1960s to be riot proof. It also had the advantage of sitting about three feet off the ground and was equipped with a generator on the roof.

When the storm hit, dozens of families witnessed the strength of Katrina at its peak. Kovacs was awakened by one of the bulletproof windows combusting.The flooding began the following afternoon, and precedents vanished. The levees had broken.

"I've done maybe a half dozen hurricanes, and there's never been a levee breach," Kovacs said. "Is it a Class A disaster or a Class F disaster? I don't know."

The plan to report on the storm from this building was being questioned.

"The building itself was surrounded by two to three feet of water," Kovacs said. "The electricity wasn't coming back in 48 or 72 hours; it wasn't coming back for weeks.

"Because the water is so high, you can't leave in your car," Kovacs said. "Your car is either destroyed and submerged, or you got it onto an overpass."

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JIM AMOSS

Newspaper leader reflects on tough choices covering Katrina's destruction

By Colin Falcon

Four days after Hurricane Katrina began tearing through New Orleans, Sophie Amoss still hadn't heard from her father.

She had left the country just days before the storm and learned it was heading toward her hometown during a brief phone call with her dad. Soon after, the storm cut off the city from the rest of the world and her only updates came from news broadcasts in a language she couldn't understand. They showed a city submerged.

Eventually her call made it through. Her dad was safe. But desperate for answers, she asked when help would reach the city.

"It still gets me choked up. I'll never forget it," she recalled. "He said, 'Sophie, there is no relief.'"

Her father, Jim Amoss, editor of the Times-Picayune at the time, soon ended the phone call. His attention was being pulled in multiple directions. He was steering the state's most prominent newspaper through a hurricane and unprecedented flooding that would leave over one thousand people dead and over one million residents displaced, including members of his staff.

Over the coming weeks Amoss would make hard decisions, struggling between keeping his reporters safe and trusting them to report and write the stories the world needed to hear. He tried to remain calm as the city where he'd spent most of his life was broken and left without aid. Under his leadership, the newspaper staff would win Pulitzer Prizes in the breaking news and public service categories for their Hurricane Katrina coverage.

When the storm hit in the early morning of Aug. 29, 2005, Amoss and those who hadn't already evacuated were holed up in the newsroom of the paper's three-story, grayish brick building, just within view of downtown. They were prepared for strong winds and some flooding but figured they could just hunker down for a while and get to work.

As floodwater rose, electricity went out and reporters discovered a breach in the city's protective levee system, it became clear to the paper's publisher that they would have to evacuate the building. Amoss said he stood on a table and addressed his staff.

"Don't ever forget this moment. This will be a big moment in your life and your career," he told them. "And we need to rise to it."

With water too high for regular cars by then, the publisher and his executive team arranged for the company's large newspaper delivery trucks to get the employees and their family members out of the building before the water was too deep for the trucks to move. A caravan of the trucks then crossed the Mississippi River and pulled into the parking lot of the paper's West Bank bureau so that the editors, all a bit dazed and uncertain of their destination, could plan their next move.

That's when David Meeks, the paper's sports editor, approached Amoss with a request. He wanted to go back into the city with anyone else who was willing. This was the biggest story in the world at that moment, Meeks said, and some reporters had to stay. Meeks was counting on the reporter in Amoss to agree.

"I could see the look in his eyes that he knew I was right, but he was going to still put me through the paces that he has to put me through to keep everyone safe," Meeks recalled. "He goes, 'How will you be safe? How will you report? How will you eat?' Rapid fire."

But Amoss then talked the business manager into handing over the keys to one of the circulation trucks so that Meeks and a cobbled-together team of volunteer staffers could go back into the city to tell the story of Hurricane Katrina from ground zero. The rest of the trucks headed on to Baton Rouge, where a makeshift newsroom would be set up temporarily in the media building at Louisiana State University.

"He is the editor who made the right decision because it was sort of the culmination of everything he built at the paper," Meeks said. "He had built this great staff. He has a tremendous eye for talent. He brought in all these great people, and here we are standing around him, and he's listening to us. That's the mark of a great leader."

Amoss had spent his entire career in New Orleans, starting as a reporter in 1974 at The States-Item, an afternoon paper that merged with The Times-Picayune in 1980. After another decade, he rose through the ranks, becoming the paper's editor in 1990, a position he held until his retirement in 2015.

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TORRES

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Opperman-Torres quickly called her husband, who confirmed the report about the storm's path and advised her to evacuate with their two sons.

"We realized this was going to be the kind of disaster this region hadn't seen in a generation," Torres said.

Early Sunday morning, Torres' wife and children evacuated to Baton Rouge while he went to the newsroom and rode out the storm with colleagues.

Hurricane Katrina made landfall before daylight on Aug. 29, 2005.

At the start of the storm, Torres wrote blog posts updating readers about the weather until it was safe for him to go out. The afternoon after the storm, Torres was part of small teams of reporters who traveled by newspaper delivery trucks to report on the storm's aftermath.

He saw downed trees and broken windows; some areas were starting to flood. But when Torres made it to the 9th Ward, there was destruction like he had never seen before. He noticed residents being evacuated in boats. He got to work, interviewing people and hearing stories of their harrowing escapes from flooded homes.

Torres reported that first day without cell phone service or a computer. The next day, Torres and most of his colleagues and their family members who had stayed in the newsroom were evacuated to Baton Rouge.

Torres helped set up a makeshift space in an old Baton Rouge shopping center with a few staff members, including Copy Desk Chief Paula O'Byrne.

"We had no computers. We had nothing," O'Byrne said. "All the photographers were out in the field, and they had their stuff with them."

They had to somehow transform a mostly empty, broken-down space into a newsroom. An information technology staff member set out to purchase $30,000 worth of computers and monitors to bring their newsroom to life.

For the next few days their routine looked something like this: leave Baton Rouge before sunrise and drive until they found an open route into New Orleans to keep reporting. Several days after the storm, Torres was finally able to make it into St. Bernard, where he saw unimaginable damage.

"I remember the houses with boats on top, the houses with vehicles on top," said Torres. "Streets where you turn and see a house directly in front of you down the street, but that wasn't a cul de sac."

The powerful storm surge had swept houses off their foundations.

Torres also learned the fate of the house he had bought in St. Bernard. Fortunately for him and his family, their house in Metairie, just outside New Orleans, was not damaged by Hurricane Katrina. After nearly three weeks apart, Torres was finally able to reunite with his wife and sons. Eventually, they were able to return to their Metairie home.

The Times-Picayune won two Pulitzer Prizes, one for breaking news coverage and the other for public service, and Torres was part of the team that accepted the award. It was such a feeling of gratification to realize how much the work of the storm reporting team mattered to the people of New Orleans and beyond, Torres said.

Since 2019, he has been an editor at The Marshall Project, a nonprofit newsroom covering the U.S. criminal justice system.

KOVACS

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Paper delivery trucks were just tall enough to drive through the high water. One driver went to find a way out, and after cutting some chain-link fence near the interstate, he found it. So, the employees and family members who had spent the night at the paper, from babies to a 90-year-old grandparent, piled into the backs of the trucks. The top half of the back door remained open for ventilation.

Kovacs and the caravan traveled to Baton Rouge to work from Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication. A one-bedroom apartment was split among 10 staff members. A block from the Manship building, the Pete Maravich Assembly Center had been converted into a medical facility.

"There's helicopters landing 24/7. It was like the evacuation of Saigon," Kovacs said. "People are running around. There's people on stretchers and in wheelchairs. It eventually became an organized form of chaos."

In the first days of coverage from Baton Rouge, Kovacs had to issue a missing person report for a reporter who had been sent to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to cover the storm.

"It was the biggest thing on my mind. It was distracting me from the other things I should've been paying attention to," Kovacs said. "To me, that was one of the scarier parts. Like, is this guy dead?" He was later found helping his mother, whose house had been destroyed.

Kovacs ensured his staff was well-equipped with generators and gas. He maintained communication with the office in Houma, Louisiana, where papers were printed, all while committing to digital publication for the first time.

Beforehand, people mostly got information from print and radio. This was a kind of forced adaptation.

"The first 180-degree turn is to realize we're a web news outlet, and printing isn't important," Kovacs said. "Moreover, the digital audiences are still the biggest we've ever had."

With print newspapers inaccessible to those who relocated, the digital version became a point of access for people.

"They're sitting at the Ramada hotel in Jackson [Mississippi] with five people in a hotel room and their dog and literally nothing to do," Kovacs said. "What they're doing is they're looking at the internet to figure out what's going on at home. And the most looked at thing was photos."

As the storytellers of this moment in history, the Times-Picayune reporters held an especially consequential expectation of accuracy; false narratives were spreading.

"The Superdome was said to have been filled with rapists. People were being shot and killed," former City Editor Jed Horne said. "The police were accused of loading corpses onto barges and shipping them out into the Gulf."

Several of these rumors were perpetuated by the New Orleans police chief at that time, who ultimately resigned, Kovacs said.

"We were probably the first people to publish a story saying that the chaos in the city, like gangs raping nuns and people shooting at helicopters … that was overblown, that that really wasn't happening," Kovacs said.

On Sept. 2, Horne reported that relief agencies, like the Federal Emergency Management Agency, had either pulled out or threatened to do so because of the dangers to their workers.

"The portrayal of New Orleans as a violent, lawless place where people were shooting at rescuers made the rescuing more difficult," Kovacs said.

At one point, police reported a shootout with a gang on the Danziger Bridge, a drawbridge leading to an area known as New Orleans East. The paper would later uncover the truth — the police had instigated the violence and killed residents who had no gang involvement.

"They realized that they just shot a bunch of civilians and immediately set to covering it up," Kovacs said. "That added to the paranoia of the city, and the police portrayed it as a shootout with violent gang members."

Genuine, on-the-ground journalism made all the difference.

"One of the things I thought we did the best job at was we were the first people to write a story saying maybe it's not as true, maybe it's not as bad as people say it is," Kovacs said. "We did that by actually being there."

Neighborhood groups eventually sprung up and were "wonderfully effective at organizing communities, particularly in the 9th Ward," one of the hardest hit areas, Horne said. Volunteers began cooking free food at a hotel where reporters, police and guardsmen stayed.

The Times-Picayune gave a voice to tens of thousands, all facing the worst devastation of their lives. The lack of outside support and detachment from the rest of the world instilled a heavy sense of helplessness.

"There was this feeling that they're gonna forget us," Kovacs said. "After two weeks they're gonna forget us. We can't afford to let them forget us."

The paper earned Pulitzer Prizes for public service and breaking news in 2006 for its reporting on the hurricane.

"He was not going to let Katrina sideline him in any way, and he didn't, and we needed that," Horne said of Kovacs. "Peter really kicked ass and made the paper happen, made the coverage continue, even as it evolved in its formats and made the enormous transition to a digital product."

John McCusker

Water rises outside the Times-Picayune newspaper, where Jim Amoss served as editor during Hurricane Katrina. The newspaper building was evacuated the day after the storm when it was no longer safe for journalists and their family members to stay there.

AMOSS

Continued from Page 33

Amoss saw the real-time transition from print to digital journalism during his tenure as editor, and much of his job during Katrina was figuring out how to best use the paper's website, which underwent a total transformation over a few weeks.

"It was a baptism by fire for digital because people were everywhere in the country," Amoss said of the city's evacuated residents. "And suddenly, they discovered Nola.com."

The website changed from a place where people went for light-hearted entertainment stories into a primary source for breaking news, he said. The loss of the city's cell towers during the storm, though, meant the physical paper was also still vital to those in the metropolitan area. Amoss said he had daily strategy meetings about balancing the paper's print and digital sides, constantly contending with questions of whether to prioritize big stories going to print or digital first.

He also felt national reporting on the hurricane had turned toward sensationalism, making the website even more crucial for real, ground-level reporting about the city. Amoss said one of his major goals was to report with honesty and sensitivity about the people struggling in the city and what life was like for them. He said national coverage at the time was filled with reports of alleged murders and suicides in the Superdome — claims the paper eventually debunked in an investigative report. He also believed that reports about looting had been co-opted by right-wing national media outlets to demonize the city's Black population.

"That was a sensitive topic," he said. "Reporting on what was actually happening and reporting on the extent to which it was being exaggerated or distorted, I was involved with those stories."

Another question of sensitivity arose with the paper's photographers and how they could depict the dead bodies that lay throughout the city's streets.

"We were not squeamish, but we also didn't want to be sensationalistic about it. We wanted to respect the dead," he said. "But we also wanted to show what the city looked like and what the toll had been."

Amoss said he never had to turn down a photo for publication. He praised his storm team's commitment and dedication.

"I'd say just about all of them performed incredibly heroically," he said.

A reporter was held at gunpoint by police after Katrina. Years later, he helped expose their misconduct

By Carly Itzel

Three days after Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, Gordon Russell was doing what journalists do in a disaster: walking the streets, taking notes, documenting what the public had a right to know.

Then, suddenly, he was thrown against a wall. Guns were drawn. Police were shouting.

"It was sort of frightening," Russell recalled.

The city hall reporter for The Times-Picayune had been driving near Ernest N. Morial Convention Center with a staff photographer when they stumbled onto a scene that made them targets. The encounter would stay with Russell for years — and eventually lead him to investigate police misconduct in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Russell, who had been at The Times-Picayune 10 years, was among a small group of reporters who stayed in New Orleans to help cover the events that occurred during Hurricane Katrina. His wife and young daughter had gone to Memphis, and he focused on covering the storm.

Knowing just how important his work was to the people in New Orleans and those scattered around the state and the country, he and his colleagues worked long hours and pushed themselves to write about every aspect of the storm to provide helpful information for readers.

"We were all kind of exhausted," Russell said. "It was a time when you felt that the public really needed information, so it seemed really important what we were doing." Brian Thevenot, Russell's colleague, felt the same way. "There was a sense of mission that we'll never be able to duplicate," he said.

Russell's home downtown did not flood or suffer any major damage — even his landline stayed working — so he allowed colleagues and other journalists to stay and work there.

It was on Sept. 1, 2005, while riding in a car near the convention center, along Religious Street, that Russell and freelance photographer Marko Georgiev, encountered the chaotic scene of police, with their long guns drawn, and two men lying still on the ground. At first, the journalists noticed only one of the men, who appeared to be dead. Georgiev, then working for The New York Times, took a few photos and as they began to leave, police came after them.

"I saw them drawing and raising their guns at us and was afraid they would shoot at us," Georgiev recalled.

The officers pulled the men from the car, threw them against a wall and snatched one of Georgiev's cameras from around his neck. Russell overheard one of the officers say they had been involved in a shootout.

"They kind of pushed us around a bit and tried to take my notebook and the photographer's memory card," Russell said.

Russell told police they worked for the press, and ultimately neither were harmed and they got their equipment back. But Russell never forgot the encounter. After some time, Russell helped form an investigative team and began to look into police abuses after Hurricane Katrina.

Years after the altercation, Russell finally learned what happened to the men on the ground that day. "It turned out [the police officers] hadn't killed anyone, but they beat two guys very badly," he said.

Russell said this story, among others investigating police corruption in the days after the hurricane, led the FBI to open an investigation into the New Orleans Police Department. Several police officers were later indicted and convicted and the department was monitored by the FBI under a consent decree.

Russell said journalists bonded while covering the hurricane, which helped keep him sane.

When residents finally started returning to New Orleans, Russell said journalists formed a clean-up organization, called Muckrakers, and scattered the city to assist in any way they could. The group spent most of their time helping people remove their ruined belongings from their flooded homes.

"It was hard watching people go through that," said Russell. "I felt emotionally exhausted, but I was always cognizant of the fact that a lot of people had it worse than I did."

Courtesy of Gordon Russell

Reporter Gordon Russell (standing left) with some of his Times-Picayune colleagues in front of one of the New Orleans homes where they bunked while covering Hurricane Katrina. The group was dubbed the "New Orleans Katrina Bureau." The journalists stayed in the flooded city after the storm and found places to sleep.They include: (top to bottom) David Meeks, Jeff Duncan, Brian Thevenot, Trymaine Lee, and Michael Perlstein (standing right).

Russell said he sometimes wondered about the city's future. "I was thinking about whether there will be a time when life will return to a state of normalcy," he said. "I knew that would happen, but did not know how long it would take."

Hurricane Katrina seemed to remind readers of the importance of journalism, Russell said.

"For a while, I think that the city had a love affair with the newspaper," he said. "It's a reminder that people really cared about the paper during news times and that what we do matters."

Russell now works as deputy editor of the Boston Globe's spotlight team, the award-winning special reporting unit for investigative and accountability journalism.

She told the stories of families uprooted by Katrina and found her own healing in their words

By Audrey Livigni

Many New Orleans families were unexpectedly still living away from home months after Hurricane Katrina hit. Relocated in cities near and far, parents were navigating not just the loss of their homes, but also the loss of their routines and their children's sense of stability.

Amid the chaos, parents fought to keep their careers afloat and their families sane. From living in crowded shelters to attending unfamiliar schools in distant places, children and their caretakers found the emotional toll debilitating.

No one knows this better than Barri Bronston, an editorial writer at Tulane University, who, in 2005, was a feature writer for the "living" section of The Times-Picayune.

Soon after the storm, Bronston realized the urgent need for parenting stories about families, much like her own, who frantically relocated to other cities with children and had to navigate a whole new world. Such stories became a touchstone for families who needed direction and comfort in such a difficult period.

"From the time Katrina hit all the way through January, February, I was concentrating on stories that dealt with families and how families were surviving the storm and, you know, how children were dealing with it," Bronston recalled.

Bronston and her daughter, then 14 years old, evacuated before the storm to Houston and she was stunned to see that many New Orleans families had done the same. So she got back to work, reporting and telling stories, as she had first learned to do at the University of Missouri.

Bronston graduated from the journalism school in 1981, worked short stints at two newspapers before landing a position in New Orleans at The Times-Picayune. She covered general assignments in a suburban bureau between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, but it was always feature storytelling that pulled at her most and eventually helped land her dream role as a feature writer.

After having her daughter, Sally, in the early 1990s, Bronston was asked to lead a new parenting section at the paper. So, when Hurricane Katrina hit, she was a natural.

"I had an office space and just started working on stories that were basically covering New Orleanians who were in Houston, how they were dealing with the evacuation while trying to figure out what was going on with their own homes in New Orleans," Bronston said.

Many of Bronston's post-Katrina parenting stories were inspired by her personal experiences. In some ways, interviewing families was therapy for her. "You were talking to people that were in the same boat as you were, the same situation," she said.

One early story, headlined "Just add students," focused on how Houston schools opened their doors to evacuated students.

"My daughter had just started at Ben Franklin High School here in New Orleans, and she was there for a week and then the hurricane happened," Bronston said.

Her daughter spent the fall semester in 2005 at a private school in Houston, which like many others waived tuition for affected students.

"You couldn't go weeks and months without being in school," Bronston said.

Another article, "Their lost senior year," captured the heartbreak of New Orleans seniors displaced across the country during what should have been a celebratory time.

"It was all about how seniors were dealing with this, and you know, they're trying to figure out where they're gonna go to college and all that kind of stuff," she said.

One of her most personal stories focused on adult children housing their parents during the storm, titled "My roommates, my parents."

"My parents lived with us for nine months while their house was rebuilt," Bronston recalled. "The roles were reversed, so now my parents were under my roof, kind of having to follow my rules."

One story was notably different, though. The Living section put together a series of more than a hundred short stories, "Katrina's Lives Lost," to tell the victims' personal stories — who they were, what their lives were like and whether they decided to stay for the storm.

Bronston's story focused on a 54-year-old bus driver who had decided to ride out the storm at home with his wife, son and elderly aunt, who had chosen to stay at her nephew's house because of his car. But when flood waters rushed into the Lower Ninth Ward after the levee that was supposed to protect their neighborhood failed, the family had nowhere to flee.

The one-story house had no attic. All four perished. Ironically, the aunt's home had stayed high and dry.

Editors chose Bronston's story from all the others in the series to become part of the paper's 20-story entry in the public service category of the Pulitzer Prizes. The entry won the Pulitzer Prize in Public Service, as well as in Breaking News.

Pulitzer judges noted that they recognized The Times-Picayune "for its heroic, multi-faceted coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, making exceptional use of the newspaper's resources to serve an inundated city even after evacuation of the newspaper plant."

Bronston said the recognition was beyond anything she had ever imagined.

"Even though I wasn't involved in getting in a boat, you know, the dramatic stories that you've probably heard about, the fact that I was part of the package of stories that won the Pulitzer was a major thrill for me," she said.

Prachatai via Flickr

Can AI speak for us in a crisis? Rethinking emergency communication in the age of chatbots

By Adriana Bzovii

In an era marked by cascading crises — war, natural disasters, public health emergencies and mass violence — the demand for timely, accurate communication has never been more urgent. At the same time, generative AI tools like chatbots have entered the mainstream, marketed as omnipresent assistants capable of answering questions, offering medical advice and mimicking human conversation. As these technologies gain traction, a critical question emerges: Can AI meaningfully contribute to crisis communication, or does its promise outpace its practical and ethical readiness?

Parviz Jamalov, a journalist and press relations specialist from Tajikistan, became more familiar with crisis communication while working for the British government. In 2021, when the Taliban seized control of Afghanistan, Jamalov was part of the massive evacuation intervention. In the last two years, he completed a master's degree in communications studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as a Fulbright scholar. Reflecting on the crisis in Afghanistan, Jamalov is convinced that AI chatbots would make his work more efficient.

"I wish we had AI technologies back in 2021 when there was the evacuation effort in Afghanistan. AI can disseminate messages instantly and translate them into different languages. In Afghanistan, they speak like six different languages," Jamalov said.

Although AI has the potential to save more lives during emergencies by disseminating key information more quickly, it cannot replace human empathy and experience. Jamalov believes that authorities should invest more resources in training AI for the benefit of people and develop regulations for managing this new technology.

"Based on my experience, one thing that people look for in a crisis is empathy. When you just have the automated systems everywhere, it takes that empathy away," Jamalov said. "For example, the British ambassador must release a message. There are two ways. You can send automated messages to any channel written by a bot or the ambassador speaks on camera and says, 'We take the responsibility.' Which one will give you more trust? Of course, the human connection."

Additionally, AI's implications are limited by access to the internet. In countries with large internet deserts, public institutions must continue to develop their resources to respond to a crisis without relying on AI. Instead, AI can help authorities to predict some crises and people's reactions to them.

"AI can be used as a predictor service. Based on the huge chunk of data, AI can predict different scenarios and help you prepare responses. I think that's going to be the biggest benefit," Jamalov said.

The potential benefits of AI in crisis communications were also

studied by Xinyan Zhao, also known as Eva Zhao, assistant professor in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Zhao tested GPT-4-powered chatbots in helping ethnic communities prepare for hurricanes.

"The insights gained show AI's potential not only to make communication more interactive and engaging, but also to foster a more inclusive approach that addresses the needs of vulnerable, diverse populations," Zhao wrote in her article for UNC Hussman.

Furthermore, according to Taras Struk, a communications specialist from Ukraine and a Fulbright scholar who is pursuing a master's degree in political communication at American University in Washington, DC, the Ukrainian government uses AI chatbots to prepare and inform the population about various crises during its war with Russia. Struk believes that AI chatbots will be widely developed and applied during emergencies in the future, helping people perceive better messages provided by public institutions.

"I know that some security organizations, for example, the Security Service of Ukraine have some automated chatbots that provide instructions to people on what to do in specific situations. It is mostly used, for example, for messengers like Telegram. When a person has a question, it goes to Telegram, to a specific chatbot," Struk said.

AI can also help public organizations with limited budgets respond efficiently to crises. For instance, it could save a lot of resources in conducting social listening or media monitoring.

"Authorities have to understand what the population talks about, what the general perception of the crisis is and what the questions of the audience are," Struk said. "Before AI, it was done mostly manually or through sophisticated tools. Now it can be done much better and easier using artificial intelligence."

Rebecca Walker Anderson, associate professor and the director of graduate studies at the School of Communication Studies at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, believes in the power of AI in crisis communication. However, she thinks that people must take the lead in all decisions and manage AI work based on their expertise and crisis circumstances.

"It may be able to craft and disseminate a very simple message on its own but I don't think it's going to be able to deal with a complex situation. And it's still going to need human components to help figure it out," Anderson said. "The ability to use AI and know when it's useful but also when it's not useful, is going to be really important."

At the SIUC School of Communication Studies, faculty members are working to integrate AI into courses and prepare students to use it effectively. Still, some primary skills taught in every communications school, such as public speaking, remain indispensable and could become even more valuable in managing a crisis in the future.

"Just that exposure is important for students and introducing them to different AI tools they could use. Secondly, we must talk about ethics. We have to talk about what it means to give over some of these powers of message construction or planning or dissemination to AI? What could potentially go wrong?" Anderson said.

Qi Sun, a doctoral candidate from China in the educational psychology and methodology program at the University of Albany-State University of New York, explored the impact of AI interaction on students' critical thinking in their academic writing. She believes that universities should do more in training faculties and students on the use of AI and be able to critically evaluate the AI work.

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>
> **— Rebecca Walker Anderson**

"Most of the students have limited AI literacy, a limited understanding of what AI is and how to critically use AI instead of just using AI as a cheating tool," Sun said. "We highly recommend that instructors in higher education give more instructions and more guidance on critical use of AI technologies so that they can be independent thinkers."

Based on her research, Sun is sure that AI could make any humanitarian intervention more accessible, especially for multicultural communities. "AI can be effective in terms of speed, scalability and accessibility for dealing with people's needs during a crisis, "Sun said. "AI has the good ability to communicate in multiple languages, which can help diverse populations, quickly and clearly."

Additionally, during emergencies, people are easily misinformed and with the development of AI, the spread of fake information around a crisis could increase even faster. On the other hand, Pervez Khan, a doctoral candidate and Fulbright scholar from Pakistan studying at SIUC's College of Arts and Media, considers that it has the potential to become an efficient tool to combat it.

"In the war between India and Pakistan, there were a few articles that showed that both sides claimed success against each other. However, artificial intelligence was then used to enhance the pictures that showed the damage on each side. And that's how we verified each claim," Khan said.

Xinle Jia, assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Advertising at SIUC, is an experienced researcher in misinformation, including the implications of AI. She is convinced that AI could minimize the impact of spreading false information.

"If we rely upon humans and debunk all of them, that's like an impossible mission. But if we have AI to help us, such as a supervised learning system and it already knows what needs to be collected, it can identify and collect other suspicious claims for us. It will be more helpful and more effective," Jia said.

Moreover, Jia said AI could be efficiently utilized in the education sector during a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. "For example, during some natural disasters or a pandemic, when people don't know much about the crisis, we can probably use AI to search for some related information and educate the public quickly," Jia said. "When people don't have much knowledge and need to build connections, AI might be very helpful."

On the other hand, the efficiency of AI in the first stages of the crisis could be questioned. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities didn't fully understand the risks of the virus and how to protect against it. So, they couldn't train AI to educate and inform the population.

"When we are debunking the first bunch of misinformation, we will rely upon experts' knowledge. But if we don't have that knowledge, if we don't have scientific reports available, how can we make the decision? How can we put AI to supervise them to make the decision?" Jia said.

According to the Artificial Intelligence Index Report 2025 by Stanford University, most people in China (83%), Indonesia (80%) and Thailand (77%) view AI products and services as more beneficial than harmful. In contrast, opinions are less optimistic in places like Canada (40%), the United States (39%), and the Netherlands (36%). However, since 2022, optimism has increased significantly in several countries, including Germany (+10%), France (+10%), Canada (+8%), the United Kingdom (+8%) and the United States (+4%).

At the same time, in one episode of the Newhouse Impact podcast by Chris Bolt, Erika Schneider, assistant professor of public relations at the Newhouse School at Syracuse University in New York, argued that the use of AI in a crisis context is not widely accepted among populations. Schneider provided the example of Vanderbilt University, which sent a note of support to its students after the mass shooting at Michigan University. At the bottom of the message, it was indicated that ChatGPT generated it.

"Everyone was sharing how it felt so insensitive to use AI in that space," Schneider said. "But there might be situations where AI is perceived as appropriate. Because snow squalls here all the time, you might get an automated message from your national grid saying, you know, 'shelter' or 'you might have limited power or energy during these times'. I would like to predict that AI acceptance in crisis management might be on the rise, but will it ever be perceived as appropriate in a crisis response? I'm a little skeptical."

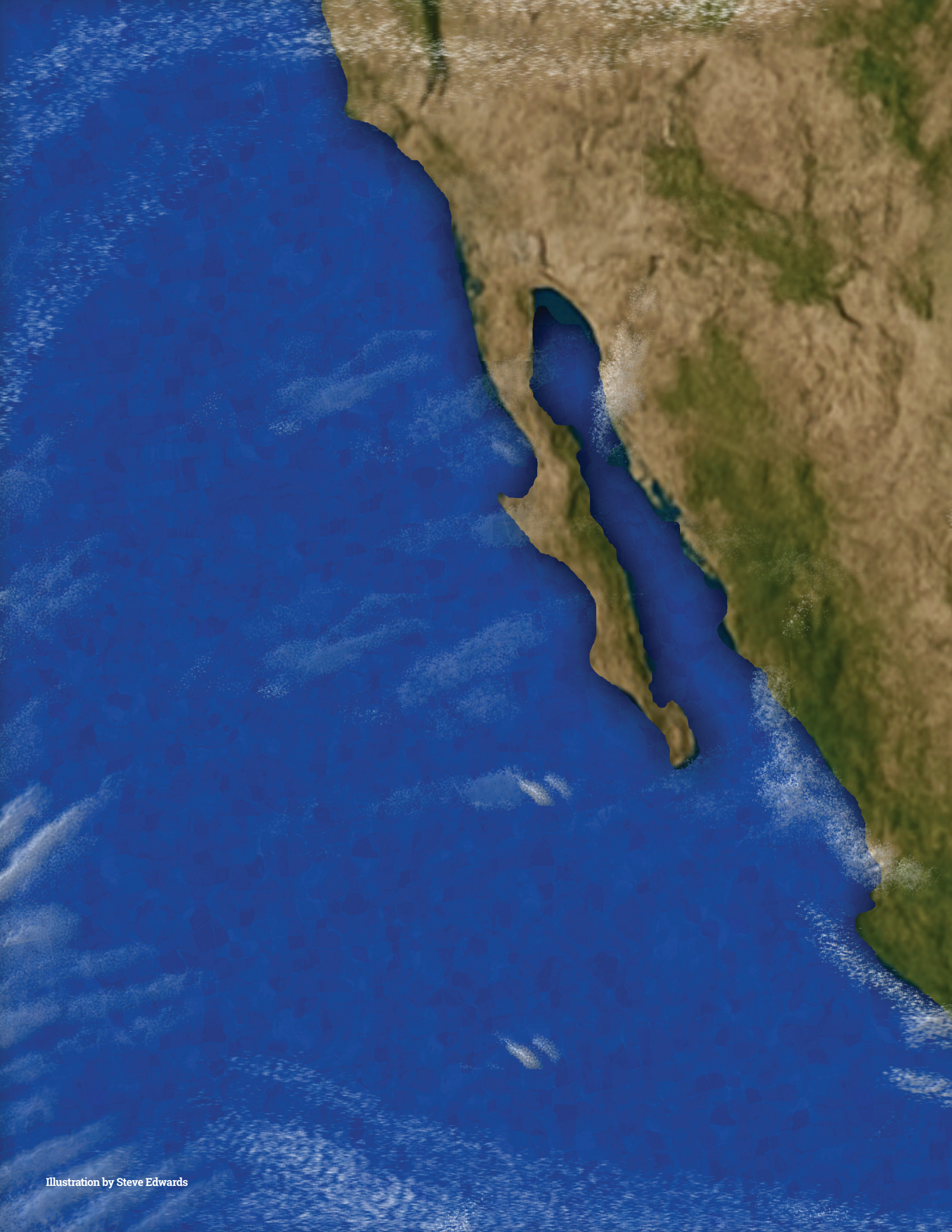

Illustration by Steve Edwards