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On-the-Ground Reporting: Why It Matters

‘... sometimes editors — and not just reporters — need to walk in the steps of the people they cover.’

By Liz Szabo

On a damp, drizzly January day, more than a year after Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans, I stood with 16 of my colleagues from the USA Today newsroom in the front yard of what used to be Times-Picayune columnist Jarvis DeBerry's home in the city's Gentilly neighborhood. His house was still painted with a bright yellow X and some scrawled shorthand left by rescue and recovery crews that read "9/10, CA3, WINDOW, o." The message told other rescuers that his home had been inspected by a crew from California, who entered through the window on September 10th, and found no one dead. When DeBerry saw his home for the first time after the storm, he wondered why it looked like the search team had climbed a ladder to leave their mark just under the peak of the roof. A friend reminded him that the rescue crews, floating eight feet above ground, were writing at eye level.

To stand under his home's watermark was to understand in a way I hadn't before the destructive power of the murky brown water that spilled across the city in the wake of Katrina. Moments such as this one left a powerful impression on all of us who'd come here at the urging of our paper's editor, Ken Paulson, and what we saw and heard on our trip to New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast has resulted in changes in how our newsroom approaches coverage of this evolving story.

Seeing Is Understanding

In the fall of 2006, at a board meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), Stan Tiner, executive editor of the Sun Herald in Biloxi/Gulfport, Mississippi, urged fellow editors to come to the areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. After Paulson attended The Associated Press Managing Editors meeting in New Orleans in October of that year — and had a chance to see what the city was enduring — he came back convinced that his paper needed to find better ways to tell this story. For that to happen he realized that editors from the paper needed to go there so they could grasp the story's depth and dimensions.

Three months later, Paulson returned to Louisiana and Mississippi with a delegation representing the newspaper: its publisher, Craig Moon; top editors from news, opinion, business, design and usatoday.com, as well as editors who oversee special projects and the front page. In designing the trip, Paulson wanted to ensure buy-in from every department, including the newspaper's corporate side. He invited photographers, online artists and videographers, as well, so the paper could tell the story of Katrina with compelling images, both online and in print. Although I cover medicine, I represented the paper's entire Life department. Following our trip I filed several religion stories, for example, looking at the role of faith-based volunteers in the rebuilding effort, as well as the relationship between faith and psychological resilience after tragedy.

The Times-Picayune and the Sun Herald greeted us with equally large numbers of staff.

In both areas, much of the debris — from toppled homes to overturned cars, discarded refrigerators, even rusty barges carried far inland — has been hauled away. But in doing so, the clean-up crews scraped bare entire neighborhoods. In New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward, whole blocks have been obliterated, with nothing left but square outlines that were once foundations. On some lots, two or three squat concrete steps are all that remain of front porches.

Most of us hadn't visited the Gulf Coast since the storm. Standing amidst Katrina's destruction — even for just two days — gave us an appreciation of what residents had gone through. All that we learned from our host journalists gave us a better sense of why the region's recovery was progressing so slowly. DeBerry is still waiting on a buy-out offer from the state so he can sell his house and begin again. Until then, he's paying a mortgage for an empty home, plus sky-high rent for an apartment.

"The trip was a valuable reminder that sometimes editors — and not just reporters — need to walk in the steps of the people they cover," Paulson says. "We returned from New Orleans and Biloxi with a renewed commitment to the story."

A Substantial Commitment

Like all news outlets, our paper covered the storm's destruction and did regular reports on the region's progress. Visiting Louisiana and Mississippi, however, persuaded the newsroom leadership to make a far more substantial commitment. The paper began sending more staff to the area, filing stories under the title "Water Mark: Tracking Recovery on the Gulf Coast." In the first five months after our January visit, USA Today published 45 staff-written reports and related letters — more than twice the number published in the five months before the trip and far more than most newspapers. Reporters from nearly every beat in the newsroom have since visited the Gulf Coast, covering subjects such as the difficult progress of the region's schools, New Orleans' escalating crime rate, and the plight of children in foster care who were dislocated once again by the storm.

One of our most seasoned reporters, former Baghdad correspondent Rick Jervis (who was part of an investigative team at The Miami Herald that won a Pulitzer in 1999), is the new head of our New Orleans bureau, which was created after the storm. Among the reporters to travel to New Orleans has been Kevin Johnson, who covers national law enforcement and the U.S. Justice Department. "I've been down there about six times, including a period immediately following the storm, and I still don't think I have a full appreciation of the damage and its consequences," Johnson says. "There is no way to chronicle the dysfunction caused or exacerbated by Katrina on the telephone. You have to be there. ... Almost two years after the storm, the police department still is working out of trailers. Some district headquarters have no plumbing and no bathrooms. I remember visiting a few battered police stations in Baghdad a few years ago. A few weeks ago, some of the New Orleans's districts were in no better shape. A high-ranking police official said that in one district outfitted with portable toilets, the officers and staff take up collections to have them drained. Evidence gathered from crime scenes is now being stored in the trailer of an 18-wheeler."

News reporter Brad Heath visited New Orleans for the first time since Katrina in December 2006 and has returned twice since then. "I don't think I could have written about the silence in the Lower Ninth without hearing it for myself," Heath says. "I interviewed one man in Gentilly who was working to rebuild his house and noticed he had buckets of empty beer cans outside his FEMA trailer. He was waiting for a long-delayed check from the government and this [the rebate from the beer cans] was his rebuilding fund. That's not something you get over the phone. To me, it's the difference between reciting a story for our readers and helping them experience it. ... Being there helped me get perspective on the story. It [usually] made it easier to find sources — the man who lives next to a house that was just knocked down or near the marsh that's disappeared into open water."

During our January trip, and in subsequent visits, residents let us know how happy they are that the country hasn't forgotten about them. Stan Tiner spoke about the lasting impact of our delegation's visit at ASNE's 2007 Small Newspaper luncheon in April as he heaped praise on Paulson for taking the important step of bringing many in his newsroom to the frontlines of the story. Our visit, he says, shows the difference that a single editor can make after getting his "boots on the ground." He also expressed gratitude that Paulson's editors and reporters "have not left us since."

Liz Szabo covers medicine for USA Today. Research librarian Susan O'Brian contributed to this report.

