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The Absent Asset of Radio in Disaster Response

When electric power utilities have a major grid failure due to a weather-induced crisis, earthquake or possible terrorist attack--the length of which is enhanced by a national aging infrastructure, television and social media 'blackouts' occur that can be detrimental to response and recovery from the crisis. Commercial radio, able to be listened to on car and portable, battery-operated radios is a communication asset inadequately considered for its contribution in such challenging situations. Also when the blackout is restored, TV and social media may be inadequate alone to the communication needs if the destruction is severe and widespread, thus requiring complex actions by a myriad of residents scattered out of the area. Radio can broadcast details available to a very large listening audience concurrently. And when the programming includes live talk-show hosts 'connected' to the citizenry, radio offers a powerful form of collective community resiliency, as strong as and perhaps stronger than that offered by other media.

“Citizen” Responders: Ordinary Men Making Extraordinary Moves Through Radio Programming

By

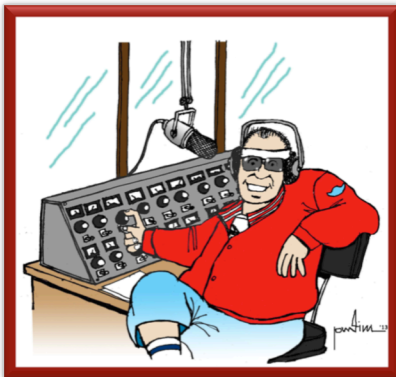
Shirley Laska*
University of New Orleans

Unfashionable, outdated, above-the-knee gym shorts, old-fashioned tank tops, knee socks, sneakers and head bands are all worn by a marching group of young-to-middle-aged ‘regular’ men doing sidesteps, knee lifts and arm gestures in unison. Those unfamiliar with the group as they perform at football games, Mardi Gras parades and special events, including the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, are often taken aback, as was the TV network parade narrator who found the sight of them funny but not satisfying. Said the parade commentator, caught off guard by their appearance in the Macy’s parade lineup: “I thought this parade was family friendly.”



The 610 Stompers, as they call themselves, are actually literally family friendly because they are just regular ordinary, “plain vanilla,” fathers, husbands, boyfriends and sons of loving mothers. Slight paunches and receding hairlines prevail with no remarkable concern for outward appearance; in fact, that might be considered out of place in this group. They hold auditions annually for just the right new members—“regular men” as the ads request. The group came into existence in the enthusiasm generated by the Saints and their victories, including the Super Bowl, as the city was recovering. The number “610” is the section of the Super Dome where the group’s founders have their game seats. Thus they named their dance group this number: 610. And the group is, of course, an example of the contribution of public culture in disaster recovery, a topic more acknowledged since Katrina than before.

Out of the same masculine regional culture from which the 610 Stompers emerged has come another equally civically supportive group of regular looking, ordinary men who also have made and continue to make a remarkable contribution to this region -- when a disaster calls them to action. They are the *talk-show hosts of a local radio station, WWL AM/FM* who are also “ordinary men who make extraordinary ‘moves’” as the Stompers’ motto declares. And like the Stompers they practice their ‘moves’ faithfully in advance of the events.



Cartoon by Rob Pudim

This article is about how these talk show hosts perform their roles and what radio stations in other cities and regions also vulnerable to natural disasters might learn from them. If this century’s first decades are an indicator of the future, it is possible that many more American communities will be subject to more frequent and more powerful weather events that will require maximum involvement of all communication media available in order for there to be a successful community response. This article is about the *forgotten community asset* of commercial, live radio.¹

Background

WWL radio has been in existence since 1922. Entercom, a large, national communication company bought it in 1999 and now owns it and four other radio stations in New Orleans as well as 100 other stations nationwide. WWL maintains a transmission

capacity of 50,000 watts, a strength fewer than 100 stations across the country are permitted to broadcast. During the day, the range covers the five Gulf States. At night the signal reaches listeners in 30 states.² This will become an important fact for the story as it unfolds.

Hurricane Betsy (1965) is remembered as the beginning of the station's current role in disaster response and recovery. An interview conducted by the author with the station's 15-year news director, Dave Cohen, provided details about the beginning of the station's crisis response role which continues to today. The most recent event, to which the station responded, as of this writing, was Hurricane Isaac, which occurred on the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, August 29, 2012. For each hurricane and for other major community events, even those not weather related such as the police strike in 1979, Cohen said the station goes into the same mode of "providing the community with the information that the people must have."

Two major types of assets combine to achieve this feat: the human interpersonal communications skills of the ordinary/extraordinary talk show hosts and the station's pre-crisis plans for crisis response logistics. I will cover them both.

How communities function *during normal times* tell us much about how they will function *during a crisis*. Tierney and Bruneau (2007: 17) give us clear definitions of the two types of resilience: *inherent resiliency* is "an entity's ability to function well during noncrisis times," while *adaptive resiliency* is "an entity's demonstrated flexibility during and after disasters." This case study is about the linkage between the two.

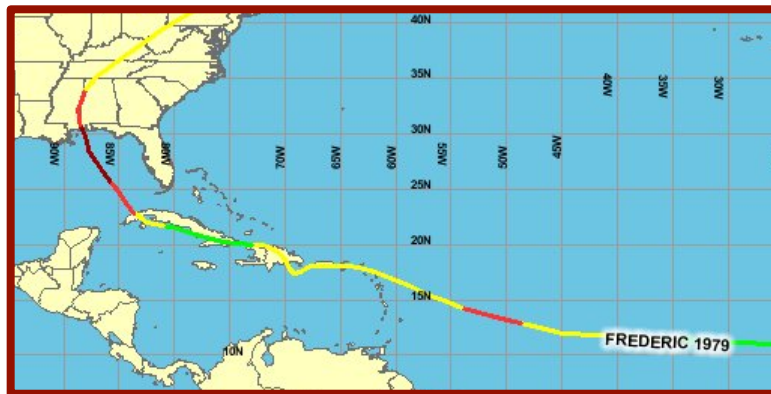
The 'Roots' of WWL's *inherent resiliency*

After its successful role in the disaster response of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, throughout the 1970s WWL was known for hosting an overnight country music program called 'The Road Gang' that broadcast to truckers all over the South to keep them entertained, informed, connected and awake. The talk show hosts for the program were always radio 'characters,' i.e. known personages. The first of the three who sat in the host chair was Charlie Douglas who died in 2011 at 78. In a tribute to him, Dave Nemo, the second host, said the show was not just about entertainment but also public safety. Severe weather warnings for Interstate highways called in by truckers are an example; the truckers themselves played a major role in their own safety because the show's format enabled them to do so. "The mandate for the program was to keep truckers awake, and therefore alive," Nemo said. "The best compliment we could get was for someone to say, 'Man, you really helped me make it through that night.' We took that very seriously" (Massa, 2011).

¹ Research methods utilized to prepare this case study are: (1) listening to and documenting the regular programming of the station in non crisis times and during 2012 Hurricane Isaac, (2) review of the station's history of programming via existing Internet media documents and an interview with a 1980s station employee, (3) lengthy interview with 15-year veteran WWL news director, (4) research on FCC/FEMA emergency radio station system, (5) use of quotes from a public radio program manager after October 29th 2011 nor'easter ice storm in New England, and (6) a literature review of U.S./international radio and general crisis communication research.

²WWL press packet.

Nemo said that the program also served as a lifeline between truckers and their families back home. “In those days, telephone communication with the folks back home was limited to pay phones at a truck stop” (Massa, 2011). The station’s staff was learning how to give the community support in normal times which we now would say increased resiliency for the listeners and was creating a broader reputation of the spirit of the station: *to enhance community attachment, social networking and care for the listeners*. A radio station culture was forming for the regular programming.



It was not known at the time of the creation and implementation of the Road Show that the format would be called upon to address an even broader, larger crisis than the personal and family crises experienced by the truck drivers. Hurricane Frederick struck the central Gulf Coast at Dauphin Island at the mouth of Mobile Bay in September 1979, as a powerful Category Four. “The storm flattened transmission lines and left the regional radio stations without power to operate,” recalled Kim Haddow, news editor, producer and assistant news director of WWL from the late 1970s to mid 1980s. The location of the storm’s landfall impacted a wide swath of rural communities: just the ones that were reached nightly by WWL radio. The station was able to play the same important role for those small communities as it did/does for the New Orleans region during weather crises. Broadcast reports included the status of the state of emergency, road conditions, location of functioning gas stations and weather reports, Kim recalled. She said that the police also called into the station to give reports that they wanted distributed – just as in Katrina and Isaac in this decade, over 25 years later. And because the owners of WWL radio also owned a television station at the time, simultaneous broadcasting was also possible.

WWL Regular Programming Today in Normal Times

The regular weekday programming in normal times today consists of five live talk shows and one lengthy live sports show during commute time with news on the hour and half hour all day, for a total of eight hosts. During its season, which coincides with hurricane season, football consumes Friday (high school) and Saturday (college) evenings as well as Sunday morning and afternoon (professional). Saturdays include practical shows – fishing/hunting, gardening, investments, restaurants, legal questions, and house repair. Each of the practical programs also has a local host, another six hosts. Two part-time hosts and an assistant news personality that spars with the news director

from 5-6 am bring the total to 17 different personalities. In season Hornets basketball is on live. And, only the investment show and ESPN sports in the evening when the night host fills in for one of the day hosts and five hours of late night programming (midnight to 5:00 am) are national, syndicated programs.

The hosts have had varied experiences before they have become the ‘voices’ of WWL. One acts locally in regional plays as well as in Hollywood movies. His most famous stage character is “Kingfish,” colorful governor of Louisiana, Huey Long. Another host has been a TV anchor, spokesperson for the petrochemical industry and is a very successful artist. While without a college degree he ‘chairs’ the most intellectually serious of the shows. Another host was a well-liked morning talk show host in the 80s who left the region and now has returned to do the night hosting. In summary they are *local, well respected, and knowledgeable about the region*, therefore qualified to be hosts in normal times and as you will see skilled as well for crises.



WWL radio live, local talk show hosts.

All of the hosts are well seasoned in how to interact with the callers. They handle calls in a polite and respectful manner. They express their own varied opinions, i.e. showing their own personalities and values -- sometimes even losing their patience according to news director Cohen. But they rarely ‘take on’ callers in an aggressive way. Cohen firmly replied that there is no training for this style, “no guidebook, no formal instruction,” he said, “but I think there is a normalcy, an understanding about how we do things. And a lot is just their personalities.” No calls are terminated in anger -- except perhaps when an Alabama or Atlanta football fan calls in to ‘ride’ the sports host about a football issue. *A station culture of respectful, trusted host-to-listener-to-host interpersonal dynamics is now well in place.*

The hosts are given wide latitude to select the daily themes of their shows and the hosts’ support staff actively ‘recruit’ carefully chosen nationally reputed experts to be interviewed on the topics. And the topics are very timely. If a news item breaks just before their show, the host has an expert immediately on to talk about the topic. *This format demonstrates respect for the listeners in that they are offered high quality programming, not simply the host occupying all of the time with his personal opinions.*

As with the recruitment of topical specialists, the quality of the on-air content is not left to each host alone. Each is a member of a seven-person team, six of whom are ‘invisible’ to the listeners except when the host acknowledges them on the air. Two staff members sit facing the on-air host, a producer oversees all three, and there are also two news people and a programming and news manager as well. This comprehensive team gives the on-air host the ability to have a detailed, knowledgeable conversation because it is based on his own experience combined with the support of the other six. *Needless to say,*

having such a coordinated human resource commitment to normal programming prepares the station for the crisis event.

Practical Programming

The programs that offer practical advice have a very wide range of listeners – hunters, fishers, gardeners, and people who have questions about legal issues, house repair, restaurant quality and menu items (everyone in New Orleans). Each of the hosts has a long history in the specialty, many with recognized achievements and awards and websites. These include Don Dubuc sport hunting and fishing, <http://dontheoutdoorguy.com>; Dan Gil, LSU Ag Center Consumer Horticulturalist, <http://www.lsuagcenter.com/en/communications/authors/DGill.htm>; Tom Fitzmorris, restaurant critic <http://www.nomenu.com/joomla1/>; and Paul LaGrange, a building contractor <http://buildwrite.blogspot.com>. *Such programming provides the very basic “how to” advice of inherent resiliency.* It is easy to appreciate the role of each of these in the recovery phase though perhaps the outdoor and restaurant specialists are less obviously relevant, but it will be clear below how all of them serve very useful roles.

The station recognizes the importance of the hosts being seen as regular ordinary citizens of the area. When queried about this characterization, Cohen replied: “We like to think that the hosts are that and we like to make sure that they are.” He went on to remind me that New Orleanians have a ‘familiar’ style of relating to media stars – local musicians, actors: as if they were a friend or an acquaintance. Cohen felt that cultural trait contributes to the bond of one regular citizen (the listener) to another one more famous (the talk show host).

The everyday live radio programming with familiar, trusted, competent radio personalities becomes a part of the inherent resiliency that is available for the region to use in when a crisis strikes. The social capital has already been built. It is not necessary to utilize the systematic ‘drills’ that are recommended for radio stations, hospitals etc. for preparation for crises.

Improvement in Efforts by WWL

The news director Cohen explained the fact that all of the live hosts are men: First, “narrowcasting” to a particular audience is the focus of most commercial radio stations today, not to the community in general. It permits the usual radio business model of selling advertising to those businesses that offer services and products for the narrow group. “Most radio is listened to by men, even excluding the sports programming,” Cohen said. The second reason is the lack of women seeking careers in radio talk show hosting who might advocate for more programming for women. He notes that women applicants have even been declining, especially since Katrina. This may be due to women having other employment options in the media realm focused on gender-specific broadcasting due to the growth in social medial and on-line options.³

³Personal communications with Kim Haddow.

If the proposition this article argues is correct that the WWL hosts are so valuable to the community's residents because of the trust they have in them due to their sharing common characteristics, then the lack of women and minority hosts may fail to make an equally solid resiliency connection for these groups. It also reduces the likelihood that the special needs of women and minorities will be the focus of programming than if there were more live show time with women and minority hosts (Justin and Toupin, 2010). During the disaster events, the vulnerability of the poor and minorities warrant more coverage and accessible information. They often experience a disaster within a disaster due to their limited resources to respond. So 'narrowcasting' should become robust 'broadcasting' during a crisis including the characteristics of the hosts. But taking that step is hindered by the normal operations "narrowcasting" approach most common in radio programming business plans today: no regular female or minority hosts.

We turn now to the station's crisis response and how the normal resiliency converts to adaptive resiliency. The final section considers what is known about radio in crisis response, the national model, and how the experiences of one station in a crisis prone area might offer elements of a model to better use radio during crises in other regions.

Progression of Crisis Programming Shown in Hurricanes

Organization and logistics planning: As well as the contribution that is made to the success of the radio station by the cadre of prepared and 'connected' talk show hosts schooled during normal times, there are other important organizational and logistic decisions, investments, and preparations that are made in advance of a crisis. Each spring each employee of WWL is asked if they are willing to remain working at the station if a crisis event occurs; no threats against their employment happen if they say no. In many instances those who must evacuate for personal and family reasons continue to work for the station outside of the area. Additionally, a large wall-size flow chart is prepared to identify the schedule of the staff for the crisis. Similar to the challenge of filling each specialty seat in an emergency operations center over 24-hour periods of many days, often weeks, all positions must have a "depth" of assigned personnel over the event in order for the station to achieve its goals in the response and recovery. The staff sleeps in the studios to assure full staffing. "We build in many redundancies," Cohen states, "in order to stay on the air. Everyone has a back up and a backup."

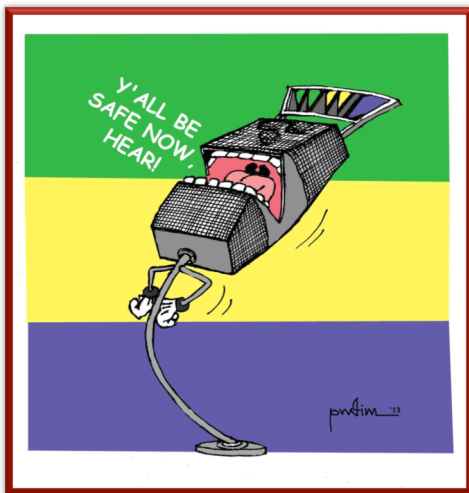
The station has also acquired improved assets such as additional boats for gathering news and back up, placement of equipment all around the area, satellite studio facilities including one each at the three largest parish (county) emergency operation centers. Locating a studio in each emergency operations center permits the news about the crisis to be gathered quickly and without interruption directly from those most knowledgeable about the conditions and official responses. Cohen described how for Katrina, parish officials had to drive to Baton Rouge to the WWL temporary studios to communicate with the citizens because there was no other means of communications as they were scattered in the diaspora over a very wide region. Much of this communication occurred after dark when WWL is granted the 50,000-watt transmission capacity that could reach residents scattered afar. "Often listeners were sitting in their cars outside of motels listening," Cohen said.

In addition, MOU's are signed with the federal agencies and an assistance agreement is made with the National Guard to keep the studios and transmitters up, running and protected during the event. This occurs because WWL is designated as an Emergency Alert System (EAS) Primary Entry Point (PEP) station for the region. A more detailed description of this program will follow.

On air programming: As a storm approaches the Louisiana coast each of the talk show hosts begins to include it as a theme in their program. Of course the first few days the storm is discussed on the news and weather portions of the programming. Then the hosts begin to talk about preparations. In the case of Isaac it was the first time that no evacuation had been called for the parishes (counties) with the highest population concentrations for such a large storm because it was 'only' a category One. This decision by local governments put a different responsibility onto the station.

The talk was now about sheltering in place rather than evacuation routes and "contra flow" traffic management (reversal of roadway lane direction for more capacity away from the storm) as had been done in Katrina. Just some of the topics that the hosts raised were: Supplies, preparation of homes, the purchase or checking on generators, whether homes were strong enough or elevated enough in case the forecast did not warn adequately. Then as the storm stalled, the topic turned to the flooding of low-lying areas and the need to evacuate them. As the prospect of a recreational dam breaking in Mississippi threatened 50,000 people in its inundation zone in Mississippi and Louisiana, attention of the newscasters and hosts turned to that with full coverage of the press conferences that informed the residents of the pending threat and evacuation orders.

Throughout the duration of the Isaac event each press conference held by one of the local parish or community governments was aired live on the shows. This was critical to *keep the residents informed of what the government was doing and wanted them to do*. Expecting the press conference to be covered also keeps the local officials 'on their toes' because they know they will be regularly reporting directly to the citizens. The government head and the head of each department relevant to the crisis reported during each press conference. If only TV coverage had occurred, when the power went out,



Cartoon by Rob Pudim

such detailed reporting of the communities' responses would probably not have happened because there would have been no media to cover it. Radio enables a form of continuing '*oversight*' by the citizens even in the worst crisis times. After the storm struck, much of the conversation was about the slowness of the return of power, just as it was with Hurricane Sandy. Different hosts took different positions on whether the public utility companies were doing a good job. There wasn't one station 'party line.' It was a *time to vent* and the hosts let the community do so, not stressing any single interpretation. The station also tried to get as much news about the utility situation as possible to learn what the case really was and relied on residents texting, emailing and calling in their observations. In effect the hosts were trying to achieve *sense making*.⁴ As in the case of Hurricane Sandy, utility trucks were parked in shopping mall parking lots for durations considered way too long. In addition, the radio station (and of course the others that were operating) gave vitally needed psychological relief to those who were without power in extreme summer heat, some for over a week (August 29th). The broadcasts permitted '*isolated*' residents in their darkened homes to be more connected with the rest of the community. And those in need of special assistance did call in just as they had to the Road Gang in the 70s and during and after Katrina in 2005.

Practical programming also contributed directly to recovery during the days following Isaac's onslaught. Instead of halting it and replacing it with 'special' programming for the hurricane, the programs are used fully to contribute to disaster recovery. The Master Gardener gave advice on tree cutting, yard repair, replanting, everything homeowners needed to know to put their yards back together. Similarly the building contractor addressed the myriad of repair questions that residents had as they dealt with damage to their homes (see his current blog <http://buildwrite.blogspot.com> for examples).

The hunting/fishing specialist helped the recreational businesses to recover by calling each of the 'regulars' with whom he speaks weekly to see what damage they had sustained and what their timeline was for being back open for business. The businesses reported parts of their operations and services were available while repairing other parts, thus giving them some income. He also talked with marina owners about boat security and repair and even included the regular reports about what fish were being caught to encourage anglers to go fishing and thus support the businesses who support them: bait shops, marinas, boat launches, gas stations, restaurants as they returned to operation. While outsiders have criticized local anglers for going into badly damaged areas while they are recovering, their presence actually provides income to the hardest hit businesses. The restaurant critic served a similar role of support by promoting visits to one of the most important types of businesses in the region. He talked about any restaurant closures, and when they reopened, informed the public including locals and visitors.

The lawyers offered legal advice on the legal questions that arise with a disaster. While the program is not offered during the football season, it was brought back for the Isaac recovery and questions were also asked during the live programs about the continuing issues about BP oil spill damage and residents' legal rights about that damage. All of

⁴Personal communications with Robert Ulmer, Department of Speech Communication, University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

these specialists are equally as respected as the regular show hosts. In fact, the person who hosts the fishing/hunting program also hosts one of the daily talk shows when the regular host does not. *All are seasoned professionals.*

Another important aspect of using the regulars for the disaster response programming other than the reasons already mentioned is that the tone never shifts from ‘normal’ to ‘official’ except for the press conferences. While research confirms that government officials are important in communicating during a disaster because of interpersonal influence (Garnett and Kouzmin, 2007), it may be that familiar hosts communicating continually with the listeners (except when news conferences are held) will keep listeners’ attention longer than will continual official reports such as ones experienced during the news segment. While the official draws initial attention, the listener might not continue to pay attention if the information is not considered extremely urgent to them personally. In other words, the prospect of continuing to *hold the attention of the listener* is possibly greater for hosts with whom the listeners have a relationship than if the station morphed to ‘official programming.’

And, the mediating role of the local hosts means that they are free to add opinions and local information; their ability to do that comes in large measure from their credibility as sources of information who carefully distinguish between their sources and what is passed on from whom. They are thus able to filter for relevancy, and to demonstrate credibility and legitimacy⁵ without being constrained by factors that inhibit government representatives. In a sense, the hosts are also adding some of what the listeners would ask or ask for.

When the ‘Big One’ Struck, the Struggle to Stay On and to Stay Useful

Hurricane Katrina evolved as one of the most chaotic experiences any American metropolitan area had ever had with such a storm. Traffic back-ups occurred on every exit from the area despite the contra-flow reverse lanes. Those unable to leave or who had decided not to, fought for their lives and then their dignity. The hosts recalled during the programming for Hurricane Isaac how they had tried to assist residents during Katrina who had called in from rooftops with water rising around them and how they had attempted to connect separated family members via the radio. This strategy was very similar to what Douglas and his colleagues had done on the Road Gang for truckers 30 years earlier! And as the ‘diaspora’ moved increasingly away from the catastrophe site, connection with what was happening back home could be partly restored by listening to WWL, especially at night when the signal was so powerful. I ended each evening in the quiet of my evacuation bedroom (in Lafayette, LA) listening to WWL despite the fact that I was able to view almost continually what was occurring on regional and national TV.

The radio transmissions were the epitome of technology supporting terrified residents

⁵Personal communication with John Wiener, University of Colorado.

learning about the fate of their fellow residents and their homes and their communities from committed local regular citizens. The WWL broadcasters remained at the station within the interior of a high-rise building that experienced dramatic damage and was right next to the Super Dome. When it became evident that the station could not continue broadcasting from their regular offices in New Orleans, they established a broadcasting center in Baton Rouge. To have sufficient staff to continue broadcasting as the length of time extended out, Entercom combined its five-station resources—personnel and equipment --with the seven-station resources of Clear Channel Radio to do one broadcast for the two broadcast companies' radio stations in the area. Cohen described, "We invited some of their staff [Clear Channel]. We used some of their facilities as well. It was the 'United Broadcasters'." Other stations in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and around the state also tied into the broadcast, in other words a regional 'simulcast'. While an important partnership, the arrangement was not without personnel and broadcast content challenges emanating likely from the blending of 'narrow casted' programming and listenerships [this article's author's use of the phrase] of each individual station (Moody, 2006).

Sources of Community Resiliency in a Disaster

Research findings about the resilience of communities to weather-related disasters (and others) often emphasize the near-event actions that a community takes both while the event is happening and after that make the community resilient, i.e. able to recover quickly to a functional state. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the best resilience includes well-honed, practiced relationships and activities, 'common' in the community's culture and interpersonal dynamics and thus able to be called upon when they are needed "without a second thought" (Laska, 2011). This is the *inherent resiliency* to which Tierney and Bruneau refer, the basic capacity of a community to function well on a daily basis – *trust, solid social capital, the residents feeling part of a community cohesiveness*. The station's programming reinforces these qualities. It is not the changes in programming or personnel to disaster 'status' that makes this radio station's contribution so remarkable but how the regular, everyday programming is undertaken that gives the community the gift of a robustly prepared disaster communication radio station, self-named 'Hurricane Central.' Another possible way of phrasing that analysis is to say that the inherent resiliency enables an adaptive resiliency that contains more *community renewal*⁶ in the process with the emphasis on 'community,' i.e. collective efforts than if the communication were more impersonal.

The Best Crisis Communication

Recommendations for how live radio hosts should behave in a crisis are discussed in the international literature, but not for Western societies. Chhetri and Narayan (2010) praise radio for "deliver(ing) information that is suited to the needs of the community packaged in their own language." They also recommend that the broadcasts about a crisis should begin as early as possible and in a reassuring and calm manner. "People relate to the voice on the radio and in times of crisis hearing a familiar voice renders some peace and calmness to the victims." To substitute for this absence of such literature for

⁶Robert Ulmer, *ibid.*

developed society I turned to the literature on crisis communication in general. George and Kim Haddow (2009: 60), in their recent work about disaster communication for organizations, urge communicators to “create an emotional connection with your audience.” Reynolds et al. (2002) focus on four positive qualities of good crisis communication: accuracy of information, speed of release of information, empathy and openness. The first two lead to credibility and the second two to trust. Taken together they equal successful communication. When asked to comment whether these qualities applied to the WWL talk show hosts, news director Cohen explained how committed the station was to all four traits. He pointed out how much effort goes into acquiring accurate information quickly – the satellite studios, sending reporters to news conferences, receiving and verifying news items from listeners through all the variety of social media and getting it onto the airways as quickly as possible. “We bring in a ridiculous amount of information,” he said.

His concurrence about the hosts showing empathy and openness is evident with his comment: “What I advise people to say while broadcasting during a disaster is to imagine that you are talking to your neighbors, your friends, your family. Think of what you would want to know if you were in their position. Whether it is in a home surrounded by flood water trapped in your attic, or in a hotel three states away trapped there by the evacuation.”

He continues with a personal story to make a similar point:

We hope to achieve all four [of the qualities of good crisis communication] and particularly during disasters we see our role changing. Normally we are disseminators of information, [with] entertainment value. I recall vividly when we confirmed and then broke the news to the community about the levees breaking [in Katrina]. Rather than just say the levees have broken, I was on the air when we did that, and I felt that I had no choice at that point, begging people to leave the city if they had not left yet.

It is not the role of a radio broadcaster. But we knew the direness of the situation. We knew the levees had broken and the city was filled with water and parts of the city would be under 15 feet of water and as it ended up 80% of the city went under water. And having that understanding of what was happening we just became advocates of life. We said, “You’ve got to go. Make your way, any way right now out of the city or to an elevated expressway,” because in two hours, four hours they wouldn’t be able to go. We do it [the broadcasting during crises] out of a sense of responsibility. We have no choice.

The summation from an expert panel by another communication researcher, Matthew Seeger (2006), of the ten best communication practices in times of crisis include creating partnerships with the public; listening to the public’s concerns; understanding the audience; showing honesty, candor and openness; collaboration and coordination of credible sources; communicating with compassion, concern and empathy; accepting

uncertainty and ambiguity, and communicating messages of self-efficacy. The 14 regular, ordinary men who serve as the WWL talk show hosts steadily demonstrate all of these traits throughout disasters.

The Role of Radio in Disaster Response

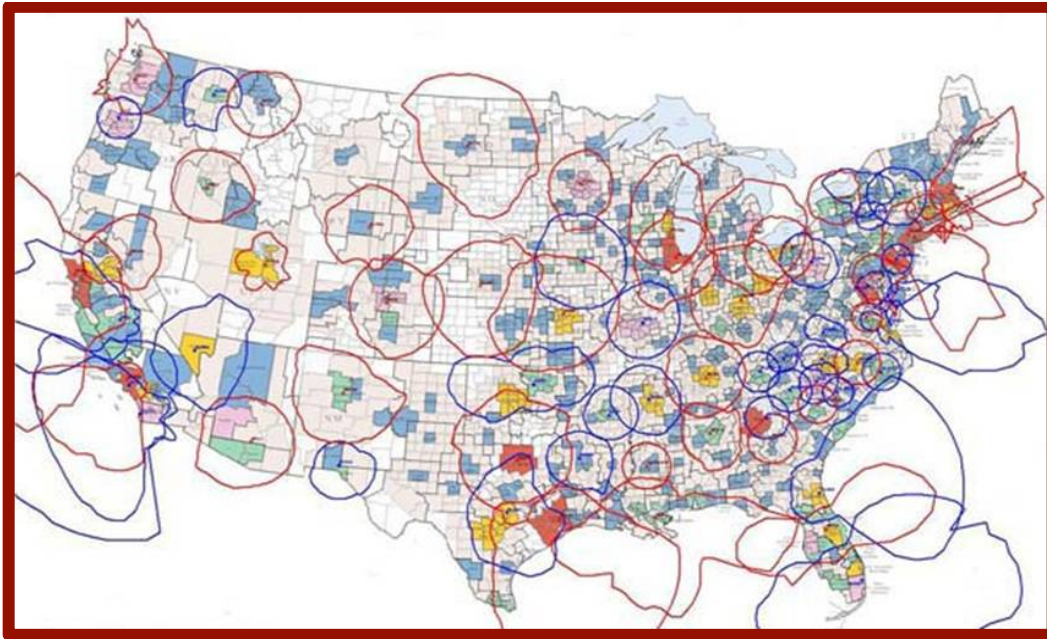
The Federal Communications Commission in conjunction with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has created and manages a group of radio stations spread across the nation, originally numbering 32 and now 77 to participate in crisis communication when needed (<http://www.fcc.gov/guides/emergency-alert-system-eas>). Called the Emergency Alert System (EAS) Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations, most of the stations have at least the 50,000 watts that WWL has. The stations broadcast emergency information produced by the government including communications directly from the president. To be an EAS PEP station, certain requirements must be met for continuing functioning during a crisis, as we have reviewed above for WWL – generator with fuel for 30 days, and specific communication connectivity and encoding. The station must be able to stay on the air at all times. Research by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) for Congress has expressed concern that despite the effort described above to achieve technical improvements, “inadequate attention has been given to getting vital information from the top level of emergency managers and first responders to disaster victims” (Moore, 2010). A contribution to this challenge is likely the lack of commitment to “broadcast localism,” a commitment to serving the needs of their communities, that the FCC attempts to foster despite opposition from local broadcasters (Laser, 2008).

While the names of the stations are not revealed by FEMA for security reasons, Internet sites do list the earlier 32. A limited sampling of the stations’ websites by the author of this article reveals programming qualities that constrain their role in adaptive resiliency, constraints also described by WWL news director Dave Cohen in his interview. The stations are often news/sports and some talk. Many have limited local live talk show hosts not doing sports or news. One station having Saturday practical programming like WWL is WTAM 1100 in Cleveland but the ‘localness’ of the hosts was not determined.

A systematic analysis of all of the EAS/PEP stations to identify their qualities of inherent and adaptive resilience is a strong recommendation from this research about one hosted local station, given that FEMA believes these stations to be the most useful in times of crisis. Of course, it would be important to try to ascertain the criteria used by FEMA to select the 30 new stations. It is evident that one criterion was to increase the national geographic coverage. Did the criteria include an evaluation of the station’s social capital ability to work with the other stations in the region and to offer live-hosted programming in a serious crisis? Recent research about the preparedness of stations across the country (127 stations responding) had findings that “radio stations are not well prepared to serve the public during a crisis. Over half of the sample indicat[ing] that they did not have a plan to respond to a local emergency” (Spence et al., 2009).

Dissertation research specifically about the United Broadcasters blending of Entercom and Clear Channel stations by WWL and the other stations in Baton Rouge post Hurricane Katrina focuses on the tensions among the multiple staffs. *Pre-planning and*

pre-meetings between the different radio stations appears to be a critical crisis preparation activity for such a blending to work. David Cohen indicated that to his knowledge no such meetings have occurred since Katrina among the stations that participated in United Broadcasting. Finally, another finding from the Spence et al. (2009, 2011) research, this one about the general impact of local radio on the number of citizens, also warrants attention: Those stations in larger markets were found to be less likely to have a crisis-broadcasting plan and to show civic responsibility to do crisis programming than those in smaller markets.

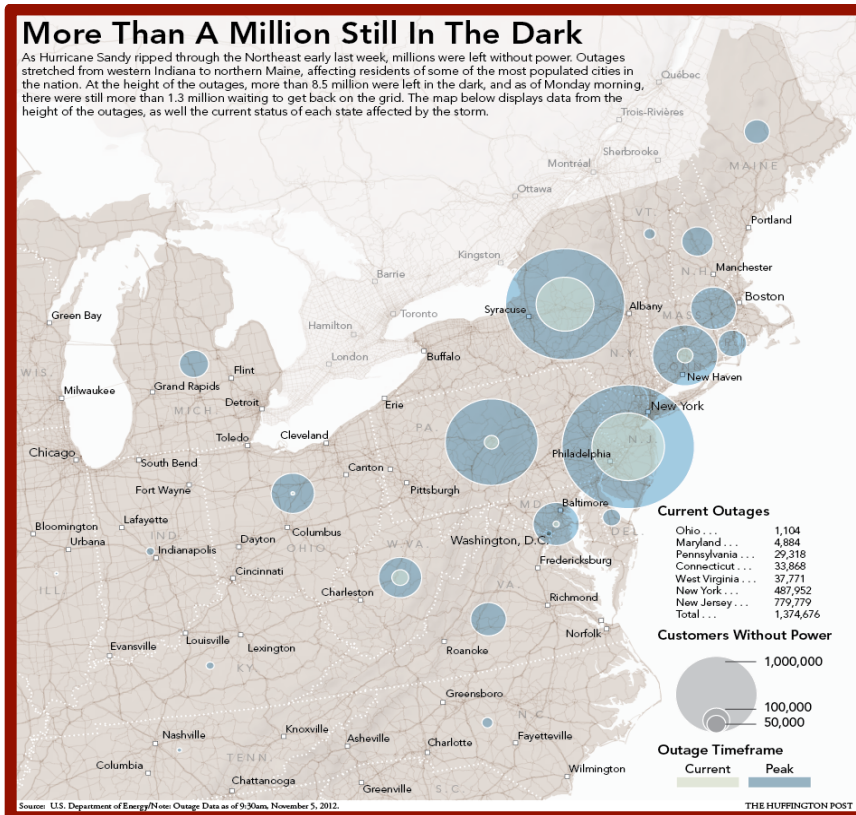


Primary Entry Point (PEP) Radio Stations – daytime coverage in red, expansion stations in blue.
Federal Emergency Management Agency. <http://www.fema.gov/primary-entry-point-stations>

A search of the literature about commercial and public radio reveals a limited amount of research over the last few decades, the Spence et al. (2009, 2011) being an exception. What does exist reinforces the importance of radio during a crisis. Following the Mount St. Helens eruption in Washington state, researchers conducted a comprehensive survey of area residents and found radio was the important media for keeping the residents apprised of the evolving situation (Dillman, et al, 1982). In the aftermath of the Loma Prieta earthquake, radio was assessed as communicating very well (Katayama, 1992).

Television is the medium of choice with the Weather Channel and local television following the creation and progress of the storms. Recently much has been discussed about the role of social media (Sutton, 2010). The TV programs frequently use much of their broadcast time to show what people are writing on Twitter and photos taken with iPhones. It is as if radio does not exist. Contrary to this depiction, radio in coastal Louisiana takes over when power fails and the only means of communication are battery-operated radios. Cell phones require charging which becomes problematic and the cell towers are often damaged or over taxed. With the possibility of increasing numbers of tropical cyclones up and down the East Coast and the more likely impact of storms of a

lower severity (Isaac and Sandy were both only category One), it seems that radio has been overlooked as a vital and very effective means of communicating. The challenge is, as we say about so many things related to disaster response, that the *preparation must begin now*, and in surprising ways – establishing the kind of daily programming with the kind of local talk show hosts so that everything is ‘in place’ when the storm hits.



Hurricane Sandy utility outages. *Huffington Post* Posted 11-5-12.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/05/hurricane-sandy-power-outages_n_2077407.html

It may not be possible for communities with much less frequent disaster encounters to have such a comprehensive approach to using radio for recovery. The business model currently practiced for most stations does not include investment in the number of personnel needed. And the syndicated national programs are too readily available and popular. WWL news director Cohen describes a common radio-programming pattern of part-time employees with prerecorded programming, some even initiated by computers with no human presence at the station needed. The FCC Localism Task Force expressed concern about such automation because it inhibits timely production of emergency messages (Hilliard & Keith, 2005 in Spence et al., 2009).

But the ‘philosophy’ of this programming – *think about what is needed, consider the importance of having certain programming qualities and content be regularly present during normal times so as to be prepared for crises*, might be achievable and might be very important ‘when the big one hits’, whatever the big one is, in that particular region of the country. And to staff the live programming 24/7 there might have to be a combining of staffs as was done by Entercom and Clear Channel Louisiana after

Hurricane Katrina. This blended staffing is done for every disaster by multiple government agencies and utilities that fill the necessary “seats” in Emergency Operation Centers. It might be reasonable to imagine the FCC and FEMA actually expecting a radio response plan for the region with Primary Entry Point regional stations required to solicit participation in tabletop exercises from all of the stations where the logistics and staffing of on-air live talk is planned in advance of a crisis. These efforts should be practiced in the individual stations so that when collaboration occurs, the ‘pieces’ provided are of excellent quality. It is no different than thinking about all of the other ways that communities can find to achieve collectively that very important quality for their own circumstances – community resiliency.

Following the October 29, 2011 Halloween nor'easter ice storm that caused power outages in 12 Northeast states and five Canadian provinces, citizens questioned the paucity of adequate crisis reporting on the region’s radio stations once electrical power was lost. The season of the event put residents at risk due to the temperature. Propane gas was at a shortage and elderly, infirmed, disabled were unable to seek public shelters due to limbs strewn over the roadways. And the shelters themselves were often unheated. Those in need of heat were frantically trying to determine their options for obtaining propane with no media assistance being offered in western Massachusetts, an area particularly hard it. A disabled resident of the area⁷ in need of propane wrote a letter of concern about the inadequacy of the various regional radio stations’ programming to the station director of the public radio station in Western Massachusetts (WFCR & WNNZ), which has a range of coverage from mid Massachusetts to the New York border and from southern Vermont to mid Connecticut.

The Executive Director for Programming, New England Public Radio, Helen Barrington quickly responded and included a detailed discussion of some of the challenges: including transmitter not functional due to utility outages, no back up generator due to funding limitations, small staff. She wrote,

If we could have *gone live* once power was restored . . .we would have.
We will find a way to do this in the future . . . *We will be prepared to go live for as long as is necessary*, to get critical information outWe are working on solutions.

Finally she wrote:

The size of the region makes this coverage complex, figuring out the best way to get information to people. ***But we now know more than ever before – the radio is the thing just about everyone can access in such situations***⁸

⁷ Thanks to the letter writer, Annette Berube, for sharing the program director’s response.

⁸ Italics and bold added by author of this article.

The Role of the Private Sector in Disaster Response and Recovery

February marks the two-year anniversary of the first World Radio Day in honor of the role of community radio (February 7, 2011). Both public and commercial radio can make important contributions and both will benefit themselves from doing so: supporting a more resilient community and increasing the loyalty of the listeners for both types of stations through listenership and financial benefits – support of the advertisers of the commercial stations and through enhanced sponsorship and donations to the public stations. Creating a successful business plan to achieve this might take effort and thinking through questions such as “How to broadcast content exclusively related to collective events in lieu of profitable programming?” (Love, 1969). But the answers appear to be in loyalty and identification with the community’s resiliency.

An interesting postscript to the linkage of inherent resiliency to adaptive resiliency is that it comes full circle: adaptive also supports inherent. WWL radio went total sports coverage for the 2013 Super Bowl with sites all around the city’s CBD and a range of programming that paralleled if only for a couple of days the complexity of the coverage for Hurricane Isaac. “No sweat.” They had just done that in August for the hurricane. (And ironically the issue that arose in both events was the loss of electrical power, throughout the city for the storm, in the Super Dome for the game. And questions about the quality of the system and the slow speed of recovery were the same.)

WWL news director Dave Cohen explained that they do not have any advertising during the beginning of a crisis. But when the events are stabilizing they advertise for very relevant businesses by means of contracts already signed with the businesses before the event. Insurance companies wanting to instruct their policyholders as to how to begin the claims process is an example of the type of advertising broadcast. He also noted that the listenership after a crisis always increases, i.e. remains higher than in normal times. In jest he stated that when most of the areas stations were playing their (WWL’s) programming during Katrina, the station managers wished that Arbitron could have done a listener survey: “It would have been 100%” he said. This loyalty is likely to have occurred also for the Clear Channel stations as their listeners became aware of their contribution to the joint ‘United Broadcasters’ effort after Katrina.

Recently there has been an increase in consideration and promotion of a greater *role of the private sector* in preparation, response and recovery from crises. (For example, see the National Research Council Committee on Private-Public Collaboration to Enhance Disaster Resilience, 2011.) The role of commercial radio is an excellent example of one that the private sector can and should robustly play, both in areas of the country with regular occurrences of natural hazard crises as well as those that have not yet had such frequent experiences but may come to do so in the future, and in areas with larger population concentrations as well as smaller.

We speak often in disaster research about the fact that the real heroes of a crisis are frequently not the formally trained, neither National Guard nor even the local emergency responders, but just the regular *engaged citizens* – neighbors, residents (Laska and Peterson 2010, 2011; Marks, 2005). In this case of local live talk-show hosts forming the core of the remarkable response by WWL radio in New Orleans, it is indeed “*ordinary*

men making extraordinary ‘moves,’” celebrating the same local ‘community’ building as do the 610 Stompers. This clear example of that truism may have some utility for radio stations in other communities who unfortunately may find themselves in need of the same useful means of communication – radio and “engaged citizens” to deliver it live – as has New Orleans and its environs.

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