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A Story Better Told in Print

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NEW ORLEANS

LAST week at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown New Orleans, a mix of contractors, journalists and security people sat in the bar, reminiscing about Katrina and speculating about Rita, the storm of the moment.

Hurricane coverage, for all of its discomforts, is a bit of a caper with beaucoup fringes. Reporters get to take over hotels, spend like pirates, drink like sailors and eat like truck drivers.

Back at headquarters, things are grimmer. Last week, The New York Times, The Philadelphia Inquirer and The San Jose Mercury News all announced significant layoffs. But the impulse to cover the big story in a big way remains.

I was part of the scrum, spending last week finding the few artists and musicians remaining in New Orleans. Covering the return of music and art to a city that continues to take on water would seem to be a luxury, but it is a gesture of good faith on the part of the people I work for. Then I saw the memo about job cuts and I worried that I was part of the problem.

By their disposition, hurricanes are a television story: great pictures, an informational crawl at the bottom, and a wind-swept, rain-soaked anchor. But big papers like The [Washington Post](#), The Chicago Tribune, The Wall Street Journal and The Los Angeles Times all dug in, sending dispatches out of New Orleans that shed light where there had been only heat. What exactly happened at the convention center? Is Mayor Ray Nagin a saint or a kook? Were the levees overtopped or undermined?

Will New Orleans be a real city again, or just Disneyland with Jell-O shots?

Those are not questions that get asked or answered much on television. The New Orleans story needed the big muscles of print journalism to gain custody of facts that seemed beyond comprehension. People could [Google](#) their way through the storm, but for a search engine to really work, you need women and men on the ground asking difficult questions and digging past the misinformation and panic that infect a big story.

Newspapers are a civic good, especially right now, but they cannot function as a nonprofit. Make all the jokes you want about dead trees, a printed artifact that people pay to read and advertise in is an absolute necessity.

On television, it always seems like Groundhog Day - get wet, rinse, repeat. There is undeniably something compelling about Anderson Cooper standing in wind and rain in Galveston at 3 a.m. on Saturday as Rita blew ashore - "You

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feel very much at the edge of the world," he said, blinking against the rain - but that does not address the issues of governance, logistics, race and class that the hurricanes reveal. Those are stories newspapers tell well.

BUT with department stores consolidating both their operations and their advertising and with readers canceling the newspapers that land on their doorstep in favor of more instant gratification on the Web, big newspapers full of deep reporting and serious ambitions seem like dinosaurs at the beginning of a very cold age.

Sitting on one of the last planes out of New Orleans on Friday, waiting for a break in the weather to take off, I wanted to get off, to stay and participate. But there was a new hurricane, a large ugly one, coming and many big-name reporters and anchors to chase it.

The rest of us were now officially off the ball, doing broom and dustpan patrol on the aftermath, filing stories that may never see print because of the new horrors - buses incinerating elderly passengers, poor people left behind again, and wholesale displacement - now meriting space and attention, and rightfully so.

Unfortunately, New Orleans refused to recover in time for the satellite trucks to withdraw. Assurances that the mended levees would stay that way sounded hollow when they were proffered, and the storm surge and the rain took care of that straightaway. The trash that decorates the length of Magazine Street; the mix of Humvees and television trucks that occupy the neutral ground on Canal Street; the transformation of the Ninth Ward into a wetlands, all of it serving as a reminder that some big stories have no period, only ellipses. New Orleans will be a chronic, grinding story.

The French Quarter, which has served as the television backdrop for so many stories, is empty, save the drunks and lunatics at Johnny White's, a bar that never closes. The rest of the Quarter is block after block of pitch black. Is this Bourbon Street or Royal Street? Which way is the hotel? Is my flashlight running out of batteries?

On Wednesday night in the midst of the gloom, at St. Louis and Royal Streets, the shadow of a figure over a big kettle appeared. Finis Shelnutt, the owner of Kelsto Club, had cooked up a huge batch of jambalaya and had a cooler of cold beer to go with it. It was a hopeful gesture, not a commercial one.

"I don't want your money," he said. "I just want to know what you think of the food. Right now, I need to give back, not take." A group of newspaper people - print journalists filing string that may or may not be used - nodded their assent. For the record, the jambalaya was incredibly spicy, with a burn that provided a shock, in a good way, to the ghosts and sleepwalkers who came by to eat.

Katrina and Rita have tested news media endurance. Jaded reporters looking for a quick reaction from the citizens found out quickly that you should not ask a question unless you are ready for a long, thorough answer. A random query about the geography of a neighborhood or the prospects of recovery will often prompt a soliloquy, a yarn that begins with "the war of Yankee aggression" and ends with what someone had for dinner the night before. Television rarely has time for all that. They want the bite short and sweet, never mind when your grandfather first arrived here.

The story here defines the long tail. Race, infrastructure, class, all those things that electronic media just can't do as well, have come to the fore. Never mind that school that was wiped out but never really worked in the first place, can we see that cool graphic about Rita's landfall?

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I spent Friday morning parsing the gas I had and then driving to the airport through blinding rain, trying to figure out how to make the reluctant wipers on the rental car work. After parachuting in for a few stories, it felt like time to get out.

If I had an excuse, I would have stayed, because this story is worth staying close to. But that would be a hopeful gesture, not a commercial one.

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