New Orleans, Marching On

How a City Copes with Hurricane Devastation, a Massive Oil Spill, and Now the Demise of its Daily Newspaper

By Anne Gisleson

Hearing about the downsizing of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* from the *New York Times* was the first blow. It was late May and the story's link was passed around town, weaving its cyber-web of uncertainty and fear. The official announcement later that day by the *Times-Picayune's* owner, New York-based Advance Media run by the Newhouse family, that they would be shifting focus to a digital format and only printing the paper three times a week was met with disbelief, sorrow, and a bit of hurt pride. The city has been loyal to its newspaper since 1837, plus the paper has one of the highest market penetration rates of comparable dailies and was not losing money. From a business standpoint, our loyalty was what made us vulnerable—it is easier to make this radical transition with a strong paper than a weak one. And though we'd been a pretty reliable news generator over the past several years, we were about to become the largest city in the country without a daily paper.

Over the next few months, the outrage unspooled online, at work, in bars and cafes. At the kitchen table with my morning coffee and paper, I'd read letters to the editor about how much the writer will miss his or her morning coffee and paper. Older writers complained that they didn't use the Internet for news and would thus be shut out four days a week, and there was more than one letter about how some people's well-trained dogs will be confused by having no paper to fetch. And of course I will miss these daily moments with my fellow New Orleanians, that durable kind of connection that comes from ritual, so different from the flickering 24/7 connectivity saturating our lives. As a region known for its rituals and traditions, we were losing another.

In response, New Orleanians did what we'd become uncommonly good at—unite over loss.

◁ Painting carried in Hurricane Katrina anniversary parade, New Orleans, Aug. 29, 2010. *Julie Dermansky/Corbis*

There were protests, online campaigns, websites, and Facebook pages. Local business and civic leaders, politicians, celebrities, even the archbishop came together to try to convince the Newhouse family to reverse its plan or sell the *Times-Picayune* to a buyer committed to daily print coverage. Advance Media held firm to its preemptive strike against the widely anticipated demise of the daily paper although many insisted that even if this is the evitable path for all papers, New Orleans should've been the last city to have the analog rug pulled out from underneath it. What about the unwired households, disproportionately poor, which some estimate to be over 30 percent of city? Will this new development spur the urgency to get universal access to technology or will the "digital divide" become a chasm.

Of course, newspapers have to balance the commercial interests of advertisers and owners with the fostering of good journalism that serves a community, but you could almost hear the brassy thud as the weight pulled down inexorably towards the former. Tom Benson, owner of both our local football and basketball franchises and apparently the most influential of the protesters at least got the promise of a special additional edition to follow Saints games during football season, showing that our local priorities are pretty much aligned with national ones. But, almost as a point of survival in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, skepticism and resistance to change has been often tempered by pragmatism, optimism, and action. In the face of the *Times-Picayune's* downsizing, online media outlets, nonprofit journalism organizations, and radio stations made plans to bolster their own voices regionally, raising the possibility that this new, more competitive dynamic could reinvigorate the local news-gathering landscape.

Recently a writer friend visiting from New York said that with the *Times-Picayune's* new media focus, the conversion of most of our public schools to charters, and other forward-thinking post-Katrina initiatives plus a relatively low unemployment rate, New Orleans was moving ahead of the social curve, something we've rarely been accused of. I pointed out to him that in some cases we are actually being dragged ahead of the curve by forces outside of the city, some with agendas not necessarily aligned with those within the community but also ones with resources that have made our much-needed reforms a possibility. While post-Katrina recovery and advocacy for change and innovation has been largely ground-up and driven by individuals, neighborhoods, small businesses, and nonprofits, the large-scale, big-impact endeavors have been spearheaded by government, corporations, and foundations, both local and national.

The Passing of Uncle Lionel

Never in modern American history had a city been evacuated, devastated, and then rebuilt. In the early months and years, the reconstruction depended on the

tandem forces of individual and governmental will; people, families had to make the decision to come back and commit to the long fight. Alongside these very personal and difficult choices, the government was working to remove debris, bring back infrastructure, public safety, and businesses. Our racially and economically diverse population complicated the recovery efforts from the beginning and the bureaucracy alone involved in such an undertaking continues to stun and baffle. As people trickled back in, there was so much doubt and anxiety and the work was so consuming, it was hard to imagine New Orleans' future beyond *charrettes*, sleek blueprints presented by urban planners at endless meetings, or cocktail talk of a dreaded evolution into a "boutique city." Now, seven years later, I'm sometimes surprised at how well the city is doing, and other times I'm surprised at how some neighborhoods are still storm-scarred and struggling.

Even if you disagreed with the *Times-Picayune*—they had an unhealthy monopoly on local news and a conservative bent sometimes at odds with the Democratic-voting city—it had done some heroic reporting during Katrina, won a slew of Pulitzers, kept the city informed during the crucial first few years of the reconstruction, and stayed on top of another of our recent calamities, the BP oil spill in 2010, with an impressive combination of environmental, governmental, and business reporting. Our other chronic problems of crime, poverty, blight, corruption, broken educational and criminal justice systems, inadequate flood protection, and a deteriorating hurricane buffer (the wetlands) are long term, complex stories that require a deep knowledge of the region and the ability to analyze the information, not just report it. As a disaster-prone community in the middle of epic restoration efforts, situated in precarious urban and natural environments, we need a solid journalistic institution we can depend on to keep ourselves educated.

Being the subject of intense media attention for years can change your relationship to the news, and make you appreciate how hard it can be to get a story right. In July, there was a local outcry when National Public Radio (NPR) referred to New Orleans as a "blank slate" after Katrina, implying that young creative types from all over the country could come scribble on it and create something anew. It was an astoundingly wrong line, contradicting years of NPR's own coverage, but it did manage to stir up the old defensive feelings about "our" culture and who has rights to it. The New Orleans brand, with its Mediterranean-African-Caribbean influenced music, food, and architecture, draws people to the city and sometimes keeps them here, but its "authenticity" has been compromised by tourism and outside interests for ages, subject to the same global and corporate infiltration as everywhere else. Jazz Fest is now officially the Louisiana Jazz and Heritage Festival Presented by Shell Oil. Mardi Gras beads and carnival throws

are shipped by the container load from China. Jazz is rarely heard on Bourbon Street anymore and many of its infamous nightclubs are not only corporately owned by out-of-towners, but have been cited by the Louisiana Landmark Society as damaging their architecturally significant eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings merely by doing their raucous tourist business in them. On the more subtle higher-brow, we even have our own quality Home Box Office (HBO) series. David Simon's post-Katrina *Treme* films in my neighborhood often, and it's an odd feeling to see the light trucks and crews and messes of cables snaking into our bars and corners stores, knowing that a parallel post-storm narrative, albeit a few years behind in chronology, is being created. Lately, heading over the Judge Seeber Bridge which spans the Industrial Canal near the breach that killed hundreds in the Lower Ninth Ward, I pass a billboard for the show's new season, its somber, sepia packaging compliments the drawbridge's rusty trusses and makes for a strange meta-moment; our difficult reconstruction processed through the creative machinery of cable television and then advertised back to us.

Not long after the NPR story, "Uncle" Lionel Batiste, the beloved drummer for the Treme Brass Band, died at 80 from cancer. He was a thin, dapper Creole icon of New Orleans street culture—such as the second line parades comprised of brass bands followed by crowds of dancers, often sponsored by neighborhood social aid and pleasure clubs, and the jazz funerals, another public rite combining ceremony and celebration; the traditions still connected with the African American communities that spawned them. A week's worth of tributes and parties preceded Uncle Lionel's funeral. He was embalmed standing up, wearing a natty summer outfit, cream jacket, and beige slacks, tasseled loafers and his trademark oversized watch, leaning against a facsimile of a French Quarter lamppost. An extraordinary tableau even by New Orleans' standards, but the family asked that pictures not be taken. This seemed a quaint request in this age of digital promiscuity, when experience is often apprehended through our personal gear, so needless to say, images of Uncle Lionel standing in state were taken, disseminated, and posted online. Twitter-sniping and earnest discussions about local traditions and the incursions of social media, including a thoughtful piece in the *Times-Picayune*, followed. The act of clinging to tradition while embracing the opportunities of a technology-laden future has created some dissonance, especially with the generation of early twentieth century cultural torchbearers dying and so many curious outsiders moving in.

The Renaissance Narrative

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, New Orleans is the fastest growing city in the country. We see this anecdotally around our neighborhood, the increasingly

hip downtown Bywater, where our young sons like to count the colorful out-of-state license plates that keep appearing, and staying, on our street. Over the last couple of years we've met a lot of young people unmoored from the expensive metropolises of diminishing opportunities, many of whom came for jobs fed by those initial blasts of federal money, then stayed for the excitement of being a part of the historic rebuilding, for the novelty of the city's culture, and also for the bar scene.

Much has been written about the New Orleans renaissance, how the frenetic activity and civic optimism of recent years have created fertile ground, almost alluvial, for new businesses, both small and big. *The Wall Street Journal* anointed us the number one fastest improving economy in the nation. *Forbes* ranked us the number one brain magnet. And *TIME* has written about the state's innovative strategies to support start-ups with tax credits, highlighting that the city's number of entrepreneurs, 410 out of 100,000 adults starting new businesses, is significantly higher than the national average of 333. In addition to aiding the proliferation of tech start-ups in the growing IT sector, tax credits have also made Louisiana's film industry the third largest in the country behind Los Angeles and New York, with much of the magic being made in state-of-the-art sound stages in New Orleans and providing locals with well-paying jobs. Maybe the biggest game-changer is the $2 billion investment in the biomedical sector by the state and federal government, which is literally transforming downtown with the construction of two new medical facilities. After decades of malaise, we now have an opportunity to diversify our economy and wean ourselves from legacy industries such as tourism, shipping, and oil and gas to incorporate newer ones that promote a safer and more equitable city.

Less has been written about the continuing disenfranchisement of the city's poor African American community. Currently, African Americans on average earn 50 percent less than whites in New Orleans. This is largely connected to the city's dependence on the service industry and its low paying, dead-end jobs. If we continue to focus too much on the consumers of our culture and not support the communities who actually create the culture we're famous for, we will be doomed to the continued and superficial parodying of our own "uniqueness" for tourists while further deepening the economic inequity of our locals. Recurring sentiments—that they weren't wanted back after the storm or that the obstacles in returning were insurmountable and so they stayed away—linger in the midst of all of this change and possibility. Our real challenge is to bring everyone forward, together.

The city's racial income disparity can't be addressed without serious, sustainable reforms to our education system. In the 1960s, New Orleans' white community handled school integration horribly, and the city has been living

with the consequences ever since. Orleans Parish Schools were in steep decline for decades before Katrina damaged or destroyed almost all of its buildings and the state's Recovery School District took over most of the city's schools, leaving the local school board with only a handful to run. Over the last few years, most schools have been converted into independently run charters, giving us the highest percentage of charters for any city in the country, about 70 percent, and dramatically reducing the number of children who attend failing schools. National foundations and well-funded franchises like Knowledge is Power Program and Teach for America have played a large role in local reforms and depend on the energy of new college graduates from top schools, but they've had to work hard to prove that their organizations' outsider status and their young teacher's lack of experience jibes with the deep ties to place and culture valued by the families they serve. While there is widespread local support for the charter movement, the decentralization of the whole system has created confusion regarding who is accountable to whom, and the decisions made behind closed doors by people outside of the community have created mistrust about reforms.

Last year I attended a state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) meeting, which was held at the brand new and architecturally cutting edge L.B. Landry High School—made possible with some of the $1.8 billion in post-Katrina Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds designated to build new schools and renovate older ones. Over several months I'd watched its construction with a sense of wonder and unprecedented optimism for New Orleans school kids, failed by the city for so long, some of whom would soon be attending this impressive facility. At the BESE meeting, there were some community groups protesting decisions regarding charter school operators and others complaining that, despite promises, their community schools had yet to reopen after the storm. As people took the microphone in the pristine auditorium, which still retained that vague chemical smell of a newly put-together building, I heard references to slavery and the plantation, an observation that the teachers and administrators in these new charters "don't look like us" and that their children were being recklessly experimented on. From my comfortable auditorium seat, along with the crowd of mostly white administrators, I knew that everyone in the room ostensibly wanted the same thing; quality education for our kids, but, even if these protestors were a vocal minority, our divisions are still so deep and historical that billions of dollars of school construction and infrastructure improvement is the easy part.

Equitable and quality public education is key to any city's future, but the fact that this is a major civic conversation in New Orleans feels like a seismic shift:

more than a third of our students attend private schools, three times the national average, and the neglect of public education here has been generational. Though we still perform near the bottom nationally, we've made marked improvements in test scores, transparency, and communication with families. The big question is how to sustain the momentum. Recently, the new state superintendent of education, John White—a former deputy chancellor of education in New York City and Teach for America administrator—strongly connected with the national reform movement, was key to pushing through Republican Governor Bobby Jindal's new voucher legislation, which has been simultaneously lauded for getting some kids out of failing schools and criticized for its lax controls on publicly-subsidized private schools as well as eviscerating funding and support for public ones. Some of the most dramatic education reforms in the country are happening here, the results of which won't unfurl for years. Meanwhile, the *Times-Picayune* has cut its state-wide kindergarten through high school coverage from four full-time and one part-time reporters down to a single reporter.

Another important reporting arena that will suffer with the paper's downsizing, concerns reforms in our criminal justice system in general and our police department in particular. In July, in the ballroom of the white-columned, neoclassical Gallier Hall, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced a consent decree between the Department of Justice and the City of New Orleans regarding our infamous police department, whose notoriety peaked with the convictions of several officers accused of murdering unarmed civilians in the chaotic days following Katrina. Over the years other cities and police departments, such as Los Angeles and Cincinnati, have been handed similar decrees, but a 115-page report issued last year found us to be the probably the worst the DOJ had ever encountered. They found dozens of problematic areas, including civil rights abuses, use of force, racial profiling, faulty investigations of domestic and sexual assault, and harassment of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community. Even the dogs in the K-9 unit were found to be out of control. Rarely in my life has the sight of an NOPD cruiser been a welcome one—my father, a former federal prosecutor had always warned us of them while we were growing up. Alongside the now well-documented dysfunction within the NOPD is the murder rate of primarily young African American males that no one can seem to control. New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu, who invited the Justice Department to town to assess the NOPD soon after he was elected in 2010, accepted the decree and its nearly 500-point action plan without argument. There's a lot of lengthy, expensive, soul-grinding work ahead of the city in implementing it, but by now, we are no strangers to that.

From Katrina to Isaac

In an uncanny acknowledgement of our struggles, the seventh anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, last August 29, was commemorated with another hurricane, Isaac, making landfall over the city. As late August is the height of tropical storm and hurricane season, it was not all that surprising, but its timing and aim were either politically convenient or inconvenient, depending upon which side of the aisle you favor. First, Isaac toyed with the Republican National Convention in Tampa, causing them to lose a day, then, when the storm track and news coverage shifted towards New Orleans, it reminded the country of our last Republican president's biggest domestic fiasco, the bungled emergency response to Katrina. And, since Governor Jindal was passed over as vice presidential nominee, he got to stay home and occupy his own stage, doing one of the things he does best, as seen during the BP oil spill, the fast and furious delivery of information and statistics, strenuously trying to look both rugged and capable in a cinched belt and rolled-up shirt sleeves.

And it allowed Mayor Landrieu to do one of the things does best in front of a microphone and that is to advocate the city's post-Katrina progress and its new $14 billion improvements to the federal flood protection system. As we readied our house for Isaac's landfall, putting away lawn furniture and clearing our storm drains, we listened to weather updates and the mayor's press conferences on the AM radio. One broadcast featured a breathless Landrieu who had just returned from helping the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers close "The Great Wall," a new $1.1 billion, 1.8-mile long, 26-foot high fortification protecting the city, for the first time. Since there was no mandatory evacuation, most of us hunkered down, cooked off the food in our fridges, and hung around with our neighbors on the gusty sidewalk trying to sort out a network of resources based on who had the most food or booze or water or gas or guns.

Since Katrina, we'd learned a great deal about preparedness and the importance of communication. The day before Isaac's landfall I happened to have a doctor's appointment for my son and when I asked the doctor about their disaster preparedness plans he shrugged and said "No problem, we now have an out-of-state call service and an office in another parish." Seven years ago Internet servers went underwater along with the businesses and institutions, many of which now have faraway back-up servers so there's no break in communication or data loss. After leaving the doctor's, I found long lines at the pharmacy because people knew to stock up on their meds and at least two people in line with me were getting valium for their dogs. This time around there was a new layer of social media to disaster planning: Twitter and Facebook posts about where to find ice, gas, and beer. Logistical preparedness is one thing, mental preparedness something else.

The basic mood in the city was an industrious sort of don't-worry-we-got-this calm, with some familiar anxiety fraying the edges.

Hurricane Isaac turned out to be a ponderous, lethargic Category One, lashing the city with wind and rain for days. But still, the federal levees around New Orleans did a good job of holding back the storm surge, our massive drainage system, which includes some of the largest pumps in the world, did a good job of keeping up with the rainfall and our 150-year-old house did a good job of not falling down. The big problem in the city turned out to be the loss of power that carried on for nearly a week while temperatures surpassed 90 degrees, a disappointment after the oft-touted new and improved post-Katrina mega grid.

Driving around one night during the blackout, I noticed that in one of the most affluent neighborhoods, Uptown, the driveways and the streets around the columned manses were not just dark, but also pretty empty of cars. Ironically, the evacuations happened after the storm in order to escape the insufferable heat and generally rank inconvenience of being in an energy-deprived subtropical city in August. A friend described it as like living inside someone's lung. Many Uptowners, like my own middle class neighbors, were able to leave for an impromptu vacation or get hotel rooms downtown or in the French Quarter where they still had power and much coveted air-conditioning. In the poorer neighborhoods, chairs were set out on sidewalks and neutral grounds, decamped to the porches of their shotgun houses. All in all, we did okay.

Outside the city was another story. Nothing challenges urban-rural relations in south Louisiana like a severe weather event. This historical tension is not unfounded, given that during the 1927 Mississippi River flood, the elite who controlled New Orleans intentionally and probably unnecessarily inundated its country neighbors downriver in St. Bernard Parish by dynamiting their levees to save the city. After Isaac finally caught a northern current and moved on it became apparent where the most damage had occurred—the coastal parishes of Plaquemines, Lafourche, Jefferson and lower St. Bernard, St. Tammany and also the river parishes of St. John the Baptist and St. Charles, just outside city's federal levee system.

Almost immediately, there were accusations by politicians and flooded-out citizens that some of the Army Corps of Engineers flood control improvements since Hurricane Katrina around New Orleans made things worse for other communities. Their argument being that all the water not coming into New Orleans has got to go somewhere else. In this part of the state we are all connected by a complex system of waterways—the river delta, lakes, bayous, man-made canals, and of course to the south, the ever-encroaching hurricane incubator, the Gulf of

Mexico. Once you start altering and manipulating the landscape with flood controls, there will inevitably be winners and losers. Some of these communities are waiting for future flood protection to be built, while some will never get them. This is a result of what the government calls the "cost-benefit analysis" of where to concentrate its resources, i.e. what areas make economic sense to protect. It's what others call the loss of their ancestral homes, with generations of fishermen and oystermen being washed out of the equation.

Many of these same communities were the ones most affected two years ago by the BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster, which spewed hundreds of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana, and before that, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Isaac managed to momentarily revivify both catastrophes by churning uncaptured BP oil back into their wetlands while pummeling them with wind, rain, and storm surges. Even as billions in BP claims are being settled, the long-term damage to the environment and the economy will take years to assess. One thing this cluster of catastrophes has done for the region is accelerate the discussion of the future of coastal communities, threatened by nature, threatened by industry and yet often dependent on both.

Soon after the hurricane passed, the *Times-Picayune* published a map of existing and future levees in southeast Louisiana, where Isaac's storm surge went and how high. The graphically-rendered wall around New Orleans on the page seemed almost medieval, reinforcing the siege mentality we sometimes take towards our environment. Being such an elaborately protected citizen makes you consider what's inside the wall, and why it's worth protecting. In addition to all the intangibles of memory and the effort of rebuilding and the centuries of culture, there are now the billions in brand new infrastructure improvements, from sidewalks to schools to hospitals. In his pre- and post-storm press conferences Mayor Landrieu often evoked America's investment in New Orleans, and how levee protection and rebuilding the wetlands isn't just about us, but about protecting the interests of the whole country.

The message over the last few years about why the country should care about saving New Orleans has bordered on schizophrenic, some emphasizing our unique and exotic culture, and others insisting that we're actually just like the rest of America. I'd posit it's both—that the situation in New Orleans amplifies the greatest challenges and greatest strengths of the country. The All-American issues of race, class, an aging infrastructure, shifting urban landscapes, social justice, and education are not exceptional to us. And even with the rampant coast-to-coast corporate homogenization of place, the country is still a variety of built and natural environments with rich, complicated histories. Though a proud native of

the city whose family goes back several generations, I cringe when I hear New Orleans referred to as "the soul of America." I couldn't tell you where America's soul is, it's too vast and transient, but it's not ours to claim, and if we did have it we'd probably just glitter it up and sell it back to you alongside the Made-in-China trinkets in some Bourbon Street T-shirt shop.

The Soul of a Port City

Like millions of people who grew up on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Florida to Texas, hurricanes were part of my childhood, and were scary yet fun reminders of our particular place on the planet. After the danger of Hurricane Isaac passed, my husband and I put on shrimp boots and hats and took a walk with our sons in the waning bluster, the neighborhood a post-storm compendium of vulnerability and fortitude: blighted and neglected buildings that had finally given way, National Guardsmen in their desert-mottled humvees and impressive equipment, downed oaks revealing man-sized root systems, convoys of linemen, toppled electrical poles and empty bent frames of billboards. But we mostly walked through blocks and blocks of old shotgun houses and Creole cottages still standing after a couple centuries of hurricanes with only some siding and roofing shingles missing. The more dramatic ravaging was still novel for my sons, but the familiar images of destruction gave me little spasms of post-traumatic stress disorder, the seven intervening years between Katrina and now collapsing for a few disorienting seconds.

Our sons are lucky kids, witnessing so much transformation around town. They get to see buildings imploded, moved across neighborhoods, and elevated to accommodate new Army Corp of Engineer flood maps, to thrill at the dozens of cranes and bulldozers around construction sites, to ride bikes on new sidewalks, and to enjoy brand new parks and schools. Our children will grow up with the fruits of a city that became a national, even international cause. The New Orleans of their youth hardly resembles the New Orleans of mine. Though the importance of adaptability may be one of the greatest lessons we've learned from near annihilation, some fear that, as the city cleans up its act and enters the twenty-first century with "best practices," young entrepreneurs, new media, and privately run charter schools, it won't be nearly as interesting as the gritty old twentieth century city—the one that birthed jazz, brought our cuisine and customs to international attention, and fostered poverty and racism, not to mention one of the lowest ranked school systems and highest murder rates in the country. The hope is that we can work towards being better to all of our citizens while keeping the old soul of a vibrant, sometimes messy port city.

On October 2, weeks before the presidential and local elections, a few months before we would host the Super Bowl, and with hurricane season not even over, for the first time in 175 years New Orleans no longer had a daily paper. News boxes sat empty on street corners, kitchen tables and lunch counters and bus stops were that much less cluttered, and perhaps some bewildered dogs even searched driveways for their morning quarry. No obituaries to ruminate over or letters to the editors from fellow citizens to nod or shake our heads at or paper to make coffee rings on. Another tangible loss added to the constellation of loss we've endured over the last several years. Another opportunity to wrangle a void, counter it, or absorb it, but regardless, move on.