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When Lightning Strikes

By [David Chavern](#) August 25, 2016



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When Louisiana began flooding earlier this month, news coverage was split between the 2016 Rio Olympics and the upcoming presidential election. This was the worst natural disaster since Hurricane Sandy, and you barely saw it on TV or in magazines, or heard about it on the radio. Even the President wasn't seen talking about it.

It was a difficult storm to cover. The prediction was for flash floods. *The Advocate* in Baton Rouge was hit hard by the multi-day flooding. Employees and carriers lost their cars and homes. But the online coverage and printing never ceased.

Publisher Dan Shea said, “We halted delivery for just a small sliver of Baton Rouge for three days, and half of Livingston Parish for a week, where 86 percent of the homes were flooded. But we are back to 100 percent today, delivering to driveways to get around massive piles of debris. Even if our customers are living elsewhere, many want the paper at their home as they come there every morning.”

Knowing that members of the local community were relying on them for critical news and updates, the publisher distributed free papers to local shelters and retail locations and made the decision to temporarily drop their online payroll. Web traffic to the news site doubled.

Shea says an emergency grant was offered to employees who lost their homes to the flood, helping them pay for essentials. A no-interest, 2-year loan was offered to help with rebuilding.

I am constantly amazed by reporters’ grace under pressure; reporting on others’ loss, when they themselves have lost everything. The flooding in Louisiana has affected about 100,000 homes. This is one-fifth the damage of Katrina. It is the work of journalists at local newspapers like *The Advocate* that are demanding national attention, running editorials that demanded President Obama cut his vacation short.

When I think of the journalists and newspaper staff who suddenly found themselves at the center of a natural disaster, a phrase often associated with the US Postal Service comes to mind: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night.” When disaster strikes, journalists are among the first responders, the everyday heroes of their communities.

In times of tragedy, we rely on journalists to make sense of it, to tell us what is going on and how to react. We need them to tell the stories in the way only they can.

This is why newspapers are and will continue to be essential during these disasters.

Our thoughts are with the people of Louisiana as they work to rebuild, and we recognize and support the newspaper staff on the ground who risked their lives and put their own losses aside to come to the aid of their communities.



ABOUT THE CEO

David Chavern serves as President & CEO of the News Media Alliance. Chavern has built a career spanning 30 years in executive strategic and operational roles, and most recently completed a decade-long tenure at the United States Chamber of Commerce.



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