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Myth-Making in New Orleans

The impressive media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was marred by the widespread reporting—sometimes attributed to public officials—of murders and rapes that apparently never took place. What can news outlets learn from this episode to prevent similar problems in the future?

By **Brian Thevenot**

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As I walked briskly through the dimly lit area inside the food service entrance of New Orleans' Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, the thought of pulling back the sheets covering the four stinking, decomposing corpses in front of me seemed wrong, even perverse. Before I'd even thought to ask, one of the two soldiers who escorted me, Arkansas National Guardsman Mikel Brooks, nixed the prospect of looking inside the freezer he and another soldier said contained "30 or 40" bodies.

"I ain't got the stomach for it, even after what I saw in Iraq," he said.

I didn't push it. Now I wish I had, as gruesome as that may seem. The soldiers might have branded me a morbid fiend and run me the hell out of there, but my story in the September 6 edition of the Times-Picayune would have been right, or at least included a line saying I'd been denied the opportunity to lay eyes on the freezer.

Instead, I quoted Brooks and another soldier, by name, about the freezer's allegedly grim inventory, including the statement that it contained a "7-year-old with her throat cut."

Neither the mass of bodies nor the allegedly expired child would ever be found. As I later reported, an internal review by Arkansas Guard Lt. Col. John Edwards found that Brooks and others who repeated the freezer story had heard it in the food line at Harrah's Casino, a law enforcement and military staging area a block away. Edwards told me no soldier had actually seen bodies in a freezer.

I retell this story not to deflect blame – factual errors under my byline are mine alone – but as an example of how one of hundreds of myths got reported in the early days of Hurricane Katrina's

aftermath. I corrected the freezer report – along with a slew of other rumors and myths transmitted by the media – in a September 26 Times-Picayune story coauthored by my colleague Gordon Russell. In that piece, we sought to separate fact from fiction on the narrow issue of reported violence at the Louisiana Superdome and the Convention Center.

We hadn't anticipated the massive shockwave of self-correction that story would send through the international media. The examination of myths of violence – and their confirmation by New Orleans Mayor C. Ray Nagin and then-Police Superintendent Eddie Compass – became the story for days on end, a moment of mass-scale media introspection that ultimately resulted in a healthy revision of history's first draft.

The Los Angeles Times, the New York Times and the Washington Post followed up with similar, well-researched efforts debunking myths and coming to essentially the same conclusion we had: While anarchy indeed reigned in the city, and subhuman conditions in the Dome and the Convention Center shocked the nation's conscience, many if not most of the alarmist reports of violence were false, or at least could not be verified. Dozens of other newspapers and television outlets joined in, offering news and opinion pieces, many doggedly questioning what they and others had earlier reported.

Our myth-debunking story put me in the eye of the debate's swirling storm. National television outlets praised our work, quoted it frequently and sought me out for interviews as their latest instant expert. A few bloggers had the opposite reaction, hanging me in virtual effigy as a symbol of the failings of the dreaded "MSM" – the mainstream media, that evil monolith – and concocting conspiracy theories to explain the media's errant early reports. Questions of race and class pervaded the debate in all media: Did the reporting of violence stem from journalists' willingness to believe the worst about poor African Americans? What role did the refugees themselves, along with local black public officials – both of whom served as sources for many of the false stories – play in creating the myths?

The New York Times tempered its assessment of false reports, writing "some, though not all, of the most alarming stories that coursed through the city appear to be little more than figments of frightened imaginations." But the Times' piece differed in scope from ours, assessing reports of crime citywide instead of only at the Dome and the Convention Center. The Times also reported on property crimes such as widespread looting – definitely not a myth, I can confirm as an eyewitness – as part of the paper's exhaustive review. We concentrated exclusively on violent crime.

Jim Dwyer, one of the lead reporters on the Times' story, says he came to Louisiana for two weeks specifically to ascertain the truth of early wild reports of crime. As we did at the Picayune, Dwyer says he had taken an interest when the tenor of some reports, many unattributed, relayed nightmarish scenes that seemed to defy common sense.

"I just thought that some of the reports were so garish, so untraceable and always seemed to stop short of having actual witnesses to the atrocities...like a galloping mythical nightmare had taken control," Dwyer told me.

The paper also dispatched stringers to shelters in Houston and Austin, Dwyer says, where they found no shortage of secondhand or thirdhand accounts of rape and murder – but none that seemed credible enough to discount Dwyer's original thesis. "Nobody could say they saw rapes and murders. It was always three or four steps removed, like 'my sister's uncle's cousin'" had seen the violence, he says.

Dwyer also reviewed his own paper's reporting, but found that, while the Times had reported unconfirmed accounts of treachery, as did many others, its reporters had generally couched them with the caveat that they couldn't be confirmed.

"I read all of it. We certainly reported stuff that Compass said, that Nagin said, but with pretty clear markers that it couldn't be verified," he says. "Also, the reports hadn't taken over our coverage in as powerful a way [as they did in some other media]. The atrocities didn't become the story. The paper kept its eye on the perilous conditions the people were in."

By the time the Times-Picayune's story ran – followed quickly by the L.A. Times' and the New York Times' pieces – nearly a month after the storm, there was no shortage of reports to second-guess. Many were attributed to refugees, cops and soldiers and even top public officials. Others appeared with weak attribution or none at all. Consider one example, this unattributed September 1 exchange on Fox News Channel between host John Gibson and correspondent David Lee Miller, live from New Orleans:

Gibson: "These are pictures of the cops arriving on the scene, armed and ready to take on the armed thugs... Thugs shooting at rescue crews.."

Miller: "Hi, John, as you so rightly point out, there are so many murders taking place. There are rapes, other violent crimes taking place in New Orleans."

Kicking it up a notch and taking it worldwide, the normally staid Financial Times of London offered this September 5 description of the Convention Center, attributed to unnamed refugees: "Girls and boys were raped in the dark and had their throats cut and bodies were stuffed in the kitchens while looters and madmen exchanged fire with weapons they had looted."

The story went on to quote some flood victims by name: "Geraldine Lavy said her son protected four Australian tourists from rapists in the convention centre. 'Can you imagine? Four white women on their own?'" A man named Larry Martin told the Times that looters and gunmen "were shooting at buses, the rapes, the murders, the sodomy." The piece also reported, with no attribution, the apocryphal tale that "several hundred corpses are reported to have been gathered by locals in one school alone" in St. Bernard Parish, the badly flooded community just east of the city.

That one struck me as familiar: The Picayune's small team of reporters in New Orleans – most of the staff had been forced to evacuate to Baton Rouge after our headquarters nearly flooded – heard a similar report of up to 300 bodies piled at Marion Abramson High School in Eastern New Orleans. We dispatched two reporters to the school in a delivery truck, which got stuck while driving through high water. The reporters then canoed to the school, went inside – and found no bodies, and had nothing to write for their trouble.

Immediately after our story broke, we found ourselves making the rather jarring transition from reporter to source. The cable networks – CNN, MSNBC and Fox – needed to act immediately. It had taken me and Russell a full week to research our piece. So they sought members of our rag-tag "New Orleans bureau" for interviews.

The day the story ran, I went on CNN's "NewsNight with Aaron Brown." Our on-the-ground editor, David Meeks, had appeared on the cable channel along with reporter Michael Perlstein earlier that evening with Paula Zahn. The next morning, I went on MSNBC while being trailed by a French television reporter, and appeared again that afternoon on CNN Headline News.

We came away with differing assessments of how the television media had handled the revision. Meeks and Perlstein felt Zahn, in the live interview, had tried to pile the entirety of the blame at the foot of the New Orleans mayor and police chief, fully exonerating the media and street-level sources.

Zahn started the interview by asking Perlstein: "So, Michael, how is it that the mayor got all of this wrong?"

Perlstein didn't bite, explaining that the mayor – along with much of the media – had gotten somewhat understandably engulfed in the hysteria that spread like wildfire through a city with a devastated communications apparatus. "I think that the mayor was caught up in the same thing that a lot of people were caught up, reporters, officials and everyone else here included, and that there was a communications blackout," Perlstein said. "He was getting reports from pretty credible sources. But, by then, it had been passed along four or five different times, the story exaggerated each time along the way."

Zahn didn't appear interested in spreading the blame.

Zahn: "So, Michael in the end, what do you think is the most egregious exaggeration the mayor made?" she asked.

Perlstein responded that Nagin would have been wise to wait for a more official review of the violence at the Dome and the Convention Center.

Apparently still unsatisfied, Zahn served up another mayor-bashing opportunity to Meeks.

"Clearly, there was a great sensitivity to race in covering this story. But you had an African American mayor. You had the head of the police department being an African American. And, clearly, they had to be sensitive that what they were saying was going to have some tremendous impact. You're not suggesting, David, that they intentionally exaggerated this story?"

Neither Meeks nor anyone reasonable had suggested anything of the kind.

"I really don't think they did," Meeks told her. "I think they got caught up in hysteria."

After Meeks and Perlstein prepped me on the line of questioning, I went on CNN later that night with

Aaron Brown. Standing under a tent in front of the Baton Rouge emergency management center, I stood nervously fidgeting with my earpiece, listening to Brown's introduction.

"We often remind you, when reporting breaking news stories, that the first reports are often wrong," Brown started. "With Katrina, it turns out that some of those reports, and not just the early ones, were really wrong. Some were fueled by people who were tired and hungry and clearly desperate. But some were fueled by the people in charge."

Knowing I had little time to make a point, I made sure to shift some focus away from the criticism of Nagin and Compass and turn the attention forward, toward correcting the record rather than finger-pointing.

"I have some sympathy for their initial reporting of supposed atrocities at the Dome and the Convention Center," I said of the city leaders. "Their communication apparatus had completely broken down... I also think that the media, in some sense, has to take responsibility for this and to come back to check, to verify some of these stories, basically just to finish the job, as I think we tried to do today."

Brown took the point and moved the conversation toward explaining how confusion created misinformation. "It sounds like there was almost a giant game of post office being played," he said. "One person believes to have seen one thing, tells someone else, and as it goes down the line, it keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Before you know it, you have hundreds of deaths."

I concurred. "There was a quote in the story today, I think a smart one, from deputy chief Warren Riley," I told Brown. "He says, 'One guy saw six bodies. Then another guy saw six bodies. And another guy saw the same six and all of a sudden, it becomes 18.'"

The broadcasters had a point about public officials fueling the rumor mill, a point we had made, but not dwelled on, in our original story. In the most extreme case, Nagin told Oprah Winfrey that people in the Dome had sunk to an "almost animalistic state" after "five days watching dead bodies, watching hooligans killing people, raping people."

Then-Police Chief Eddie Compass – pushed into retirement by Nagin immediately after our story broke – spoke of "babies" being raped.

Still, Brown got past the public-official bashing and grasped the point of our story that many others missed: It hadn't been an "investigation," as some termed it, but rather an explanatory piece. We never intended to write "gotcha" journalism or declare ourselves the holier-than-thou hometown paper, preaching to the rest of the media and the public officials we all quoted. We just wanted to get the story right, and explain, to the extent possible, how it came to be wrong.

Dwyer expressed a similar goal. In his story, he didn't explicitly challenge any early reporting from the Times or any other outlet. Instead, he referred generally to widespread reports of violence and concentrated on the story itself: what really happened.

"My purpose wasn't to flay the New York Times or anybody else. This wasn't another Jayson Blair or Judith Miller situation, although it seems like sometimes these days your integrity is judged on how much you beat yourself like a pious Shiite," he says. "Whatever people reported from there in the early days, getting cold, hard facts was no easy task. They were doing the best they could, while trying to find electricity every 30 minutes just to be able to file, or in the Times-Picayune's case, struggling just to publish a paper on the Web."

Keith Woods, dean of faculty at the Poynter Institute, as well as a former Times-Picayune reporter, city editor and opinion writer and a New Orleans native, takes an even harder line on what he describes as a fashionable but destructive self-flagellation by media outlets – particularly television – that amounts to the media undercutting their already fragile credibility with the public. The press has had its legitimate reporter-writing-fiction scandals – Jayson Blair, Stephen Glass, Mike Barnicle – and in those instances, the media should indeed police themselves – brutally, Woods says. But early Katrina reporting, in which reporters often attributed tales and/or couched stories of violence with qualifiers, isn't even in the same ballpark, much less the same league, as making up stories out of thin air.

Some television outlets' willingness to put media-haters on air to bash the press only made the problem worse. "It was the typical self-abuse that follows media mistakes, and it became an equally unhelpful debate, an 'are not! are too!' debate over whether the media are biased or whatever," Woods says. "This sort of cannibalization is of great concern to me. If we just continue to stick our fingers in the wind, and then when we feel the hot breath of the public, we continue this self-abuse, then we'll just continue to hold up this unrealistic expectation that we're perfect... If we're walking around expecting that every time somebody goes off and does their job that it's done perfectly, then, first of all, we wouldn't have jobs in journalism, and second, public officials wouldn't need term limits."

Woods, who has been interviewed several times about Katrina reporting, found himself silently boiling with anger during one television panel discussion. He had agreed to go on PBS' "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" for a discussion of hurricane coverage, hoping for the fair, reasonable treatment for which Lehrer and PBS have been long respected. Instead, he found himself in the midst of a near food fight between NBC reporter Carl Quintanilla – in one corner, defending the media – and conservative radio talk show host Hugh Hewitt in the other corner, clubbing them.

"They'd go to the NBC reporter, who I thought made reasonable comments, to Hewitt, whose message was basically, 'Shoot the media,' then turn to me and say, 'Keith, what do you think?'" Woods says. "I was incensed."

Av Westin, a former vice president and executive producer for ABC News, says television reporters' and anchors' repeating of mythical violence, with sloppy attribution, marred otherwise remarkable journalism that aggressively reported the catastrophic damage of Katrina. He chalked it up to a lesson the television media should already have learned in the era of 24-hour news: Journalism requires thoughtful editing often absent in the competitive rush to air emotional breaking news.

"When I was at ABC, nothing got on the air without having the piece read in to us," he says. "Now,

they're on the air 24-7 and they have to fill airtime, and that leads frequently to the reporting of rumor and speculation... Rather than saying, 'Let's wait five minutes,' they just go with it because it's in front of them. They keep learning that lesson and forgetting that lesson."

Then the mistakes feed off one another and multiply, Westin says. "There's something I call the 'out there syndrome' – it's okay for us to publish it because someone else already has, so it's 'out there,'" he says, rather than each media outlet confirming its own facts. "With 24-7 news, the deadline is always now, you go with whatever you've got, you stick it on the air."

Even as I became temporarily famous (for the standard 15 minutes) in the television news world, I was taken aback to find myself vilified by a few bloggers. In the blogosphere, I served as a target for a seemingly unquenchable disdain for the MSM.

Some branded me a hypocrite for writing about myth-making after I'd earlier reported one of the myths, the "30 or 40" bodies. But what's curious about much of the criticism is that reporters from the dreaded MSM often did a more thorough and sober job of correcting mainstream reports than did their sworn enemies in the blogosphere. Indeed, because most bloggers do little or no original reporting, they used my story about myths, along with those of the L.A. Times and New York Times, as the tools with which to beat us about the ears. They clubbed us with our own sticks.

Some blogs offered fair criticism, but others hyperventilated with unchecked rage that contributed little or nothing to the larger public good of finding out what had really happened. Some simply piled myth upon myth, developing media conspiracies out of what in the vast majority of cases were honest mistakes.

Lester Dent of ChronWatch, a San Francisco-based "media watchdog and conservative news site," went so far as to compare me to Jayson Blair. Dent asserted I "obviously" had never even been at the Convention Center and then demanded my head on a platter.

"Thevenot should be disciplined, up to and including being fired," Dent wrote.

I asked Dent about his allegation in an e-mail. He sent pages of further criticism in response, but somewhat reluctantly dropped the charge that I hadn't been at the scene, along with the Blair comparison.

"I will accept that you were on site making the report," he wrote in an e-mail response. "So no Jayson Blair moment."

As New Orleanians, playing a key role in correcting the international image of our own citizens gave us a deep satisfaction. Mostly poor, overwhelmingly African American, flood victims in the two shelters had been, in the most egregious cases, portrayed as beasts, raping and killing one another and even shooting at rescue workers trying to save them.

As journalists, reporting myths and later correcting them offers vital lessons on ramping up skepticism in initial reporting from chaotic environments – even if the sources are authoritative ones.

We have three basic tools to use here, one during the reporting, the other during publishing, the third during any needed correction of initial reports.

The first is the persistent questioning of sources – about their sources: How do you know that? Did you see it? Who told you this? Are you 100 percent sure this happened? Who else can confirm it?

The second, wisely suggested in a column by former Washington Post Ombudsman Michael Getler, is careful and frequent qualification: "There is a journalistic device that is informative, accurate and protective, but that too often doesn't get used. It is a simple sentence that says: 'This account could not be independently verified.'"

The second time I wrote about the bodies in the freezer, as part of a narrative piece I penned for this magazine, I added just such a qualification (see "Apocalypse in New Orleans," October/November). At the time, a few days after I'd been to the Convention Center, I still had no higher-level confirmation of a body count – because no official count had been taken. So I added a sentence saying the presence and number of bodies at the center was "still unconfirmed amid a swirl of urban myths churned up by the storm."

The revision came as a result of a conversation with an editor in which I initially recommended cutting the mention of 40 bodies altogether unless I could confirm it independently before deadline. We compromised, adding the qualifier and strict attribution of the number to the guardsmen.

The third tool, which lately has been on display by many, though not all, media outlets, is an attitude that embraces the correcting of major news stories as news itself, not something to be buried in a corrections box.

"I think you treat it as a separate story, and it should have A1 prominence," says Hub Brown, an associate professor of broadcast journalism at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. "Of course, print journalists are so much more meticulous at correcting their mistakes... Why not have a segment in the newscast that says, 'We've reported this through the past day, and it turned out to be wrong?'"

That sort of record correction would be a lot less painful – indeed, not painful at all – if journalists' initial dispatches contained detailed attribution, especially for high-temperature reports out of disaster zones. With stories like Katrina, in which rock-solid information in many cases proved so elusive, that should extend even to the point of publishing exactly how official sources came to know the information in question. David Carr, a media columnist for the New York Times, was one of the first to question some of the early Katrina reporting in a September 19 column headlined: "More Horrible Than Truth: News Reports."

While Carr, in his column and in an interview, asserted that the media should shoulder their share of the blame, he was stunned at the degree to which public officials solidified the myths. "In New Orleans, that's what set this apart" from other examples of misinformation reported by the media, he says. "I was actually prepared a week before and had a column set to go, but then I realized the top police official and the top elected official were confirming these rumors. So how could I go after

reporters on the ground receiving confirmation that this happened?"

Carr revised the column to address public officials' roles. Many have given Nagin and Compass a pass, saying they probably repeated exaggerations by mistake in a desperate attempt to get help for a truly desperate situation. Carr, however, suggests they were driven in part by political motives.

"Usually the first reaction of officials in crisis is to obfuscate and tamp down the rumors," he says. "Nagin and Compass stood there with a can of gasoline... In part what they were trying to do was explain that they had a mess on their hands – and that the feds had dropped the ball – by communicating an atmosphere of chaos that rendered their inability understandable."

In the worst of the storm reporting, tales of violence, rapes, murders and other mayhem were simply stated as fact with no attribution at all.

I am among those who committed this sin. In my previous AJR piece, although I attributed the account of bodies in the freezer and added that it could not be confirmed, I got loose with the attribution at another point in the story, describing the Convention Center as "a nightly scene of murders, rapes and regular stampedes."

What I later confirmed is that occasional gunfire, stampedes and terror did indeed plague the Convention Center. But only one death could be called a suspected homicide, a body with a gunshot wound, according to Kristen Meyer, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health and Hospitals. Meyer also confirmed that four bodies were retrieved from just inside the food service entrance, the same place I witnessed the four bodies lying under sheets. Widespread reports of rapes could not be confirmed.

Only one of those bodies has since been identified by name by her family, that of 79-year-old Clementine Eleby, who was not the gunshot victim, Meyer says.

While the media should learn lessons from Katrina, appropriate caution can't lead to paralysis. Backing off aggressive reporting of scenes where "official" information and sources, in some cases, literally don't exist isn't an option. The many early Katrina stories marred by exaggerations or errors still stand out as a point of pride for the media. The quick reaction to the storm by reporters put accounts – most of them true and confirmed – of dire suffering in the faces of the public and authorities, prompting them to take action that saved lives.

As the debate about misreported Katrina violence rolled through blogs and more mainstream outlets, a conventional wisdom emerged: White middle-class reporters only believed and reported atrocities because they were predisposed to accept the worst about poor, black flood victims.

The race and class dynamics here are far more complicated. Many of the worst stories were attributed to poor, black flood victims themselves, along with African American public officials.

Brown, the Syracuse professor and an African American who teaches about diversity in the media, says that's no surprise. Black people are sometimes unconsciously biased against black people, too.

"The fact that racism exists in the country doesn't mean everybody of one race feels one way, and everybody of another race feels the other," he says. "Sometimes victims of racism believe the worst about themselves. That's part of what makes it so harmful."

Poynter's Woods, an African American who has been writing and teaching about reporting on racial issues for years, doesn't buy the charge that the reports were driven largely by racial bias. It's not necessarily a gigantic leap in logic, he says, to believe that New Orleanians would murder one another in desperate times – they murder one another with regularity during normal times.

"I spent most of my life in the city of New Orleans, and when I left, it was the murder capital of the country," Woods says. "If you were to tell me a bunch of people murdered each other in the Dome and Convention Center, why wouldn't I believe it?.. Race played a role, but it's an indecipherable role. It's useless trying to spend a lot of time trying to figure it out because you have to climb into the psyche of the people who were there."

You also have to deal in hypothetical comparisons. What would the media have reported if the Dome had been packed with white people?

The reality of being white in New Orleans and most of America, of course, substantially increases the likelihood of being middle class, and thus substantially decreases the likelihood of being anywhere near a shelter of any kind during a disaster of Katrina proportions.

I'll offer another hypothetical comparison that takes class out of the issue and leaves only race: If Katrina had hit a poor, white trailer-park town in, say, the Florida Panhandle, and white refugees and white public officials had offered the media tales of rape and murder, would any of us have doubted their "eyewitness" or "official" accounts?

There's no simple answer. White trailer-park towns don't typically include a Dome that might end up packed with about 30,000 people, with no power, no working toilets and scant medical care.

While the role of race can't be definitively measured, I have little doubt that, consciously or unconsciously, some white reporters and probably a smaller number of black ones found it more plausible that babies had been raped and children knifed in a black crowd than they would in a theoretical white one.

But I don't think race was the overriding factor.

I'm more inclined to go with an expanded version of Aaron Brown's gossip-line theory: that stories that may have started with some basis in fact got exaggerated and distorted as they were passed orally – often the only mode of communication – through extraordinarily frustrated and stressed multitudes of people, including refugees, cops, soldiers, public officials and, ultimately, the press.

The confusion was created by a titanic clash of communications systems. Stone-age storytelling got amplified by space-age technology.

A person might have seen a man passed out from dehydration in the Superdome, for instance, and assumed he was dead, then assumed there must be more dead. In the retelling, it becomes, "There's bodies in the Dome." Retold a few more times by stressed and frightened people – all the way up to the mayor – and it became, "There's so many bodies in the Dome you can't count them."

Then the media arrived, with satellite phones and modems, BlackBerrys, television trucks with the ability to broadcast worldwide and the technology to post on the Internet in an instant – and most of them not realizing that normal rules of sourcing no longer ensured accuracy.

The gossip line then circled the globe, as officials, hurricane victims, and rescue and security personnel began to confirm nightmarish scenarios, sincerely believing what they were saying and wanting desperately to get the word out – and get help on the way.

I can assure you that Mikel Brooks and his fellow guardsman sincerely believed what they told me. They talked to me out of disgust at the horrors, real and imagined. They did not "lie," which implies intent. They were consumed with a more important job at the time than nailing down every report they heard and believed: giving food and water to the living to keep them from joining the dead. It was my job to make sure what they said was true.

Ultimately, I followed up and did that job, as did many others. What Woods finds curious about the media-bashing on the Katrina story is that critics don't credit the media for doing the research to prove their early reports wrong.

"Don't forget, the journalists kept reporting – the reason you know that things were reported badly is because the journalists told you."