



After the Storms: The South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* Investigates FEMA

Teaching Note

Case Summary

The unpredictability and scope of major natural disasters make them challenging events for any media outlet to cover. That is especially true of local media, with less time, manpower and fewer resources at their disposal than their national counterparts.

This case study focuses on the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel*, the largest paper in the Fort Lauderdale and Boca Raton area, as it set about investigating the aftermath of four hurricanes in the fall of 2004. The case provides a history of investigative reporting at the *Sun-Sentinel*, and the process by which the newspaper's reporters began to consider long-term enterprise stories tied to the storms. A map on the website of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)—which highlighted the location and density of applicants claiming federal damage from two storms—gave reporters a tentative lead. They suspected that the map hid a larger story of financial malfeasance, and that inconsistency existed between areas affected by the storm and the places where people were claiming federal relief.

But how should they develop their hunch? The case follows the reporters' investigative processes and thinking, as well as their reporting strategy and methodology as they attempted to develop a single nugget of information into a fully-fledged story. Their work paid off, leading to fraud arrests and Senate hearings before reaching a crossroads. The next logical story was one that documented fraud against FEMA on a national, not just a state, level. But the *Sun-Sentinel* was a regional paper coping with dwindling revenues. The paper would have to weigh pros and cons as it decided whether to commit the substantial time and resources necessary to expand the story.

Students assume the role of South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* reporters and editors who must decide how to search for and verify irrefutable evidence for a story that quickly moves far beyond the scope of anything they have initially imagined.

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Teaching Objectives

This case introduces students to the challenges of investigative research, including how to conceive stories, read maps and data effectively, and make the most of publicly available information. It also brings students face-to-face with some of the difficulties involved in dealing with government agencies and parties that may be wary of talking to reporters, while illustrating some of the strategies that can be used to do so.

One of the broad themes that the case raises for discussion is the painstaking, often unglamorous nature of investigative journalism. The *Sun-Sentinel* reporters waded through documents, pore over maps, pursue tips and visit potentially dangerous housing projects—often without a clear sense of what they will find. In the process, they frequently face rejection, stonewalling and uncertainty about whether they will be able to prove their evolving thesis.

The case raises for discussion elementary reporting questions, such as how to identify stories, generate leads, and pursue information. How and where do you start? What are the steps and techniques that are likely to be effective? How do you move ahead in the face of seeming road-blocks, such as FEMA's refusal to provide names and addresses of Miami-Dade aid recipients?

Another angle for students to discuss is timing: when and how should they reveal information to sources; when is the right time to publish? The *Sun-Sentinel*, for example, is concerned as it waits for FEMA data that another media outlet will scoop them. But rushing to publish too soon can also be risky. Similarly, describing to sources the contours of a story can generate information and help determine the strength of leads, but also risks alarming sources so that they stop talking.

The *Sun-Sentinel's* investigation also highlights how important it is for reporters to research thoroughly the institutions or people that they plan to cover, and to familiarize themselves with the tools of investigative reporting, from use of databases to legal processes such as submitting FOIA requests. Students should consider points in the case when such knowledge, or lack of it, affected the newspaper's reporting.

We have found that students tend to consider the case through the prism of the widely covered Hurricane Katrina that hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, a year after those that battered Florida. Teachers should ensure that class members consider the events facing the *Sun-Sentinel* without the benefit of hindsight, in the same context that Rosenhouse, Demma, and others experienced.

Class Plan

Use the case in a class about investigative reporting, teamwork in journalism, the role of regional media outlets or the challenges faced by newspapers in a changing media landscape.

Pre-class questions. Help students prepare for class by assigning one or both questions below. These can be used as study questions, for students to bear in mind as they read through the case, or as the basis for short, written responses. We found it useful to ask students to post their answers (no more than 250 words) in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their

thoughts and express them succinctly. The posts also highlight talking points ahead of class, and identify specific students to call upon during the discussion. Asking students to recapitulate their online responses in class—rather than simply reading the homework—keeps the discussion spontaneous and lively.

1) What are the key components of a good investigative story?

2) You're a reporter at the South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* in the early fall of 2004 after four hurricanes hit the state. You want to write an investigative story. List three angles that you might pursue.

Since the case evolves over nearly a year, writing a timeline of key developments on the board gives students a helpful visual reference point, reminding them of details and chronology.

In-class questions. The online posts are a useful starting point for preliminary discussion. Then ask any of the following questions as part of an 80-90 minute discussion. The questions will depend on the goals of the class and what students should learn from the discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Imagine that you are a member of the *Sun-Sentinel* investigative team when the hurricanes hit Florida in 2004. You want to find ways to cover the story. Where do you begin? What kind of angles might you pursue? Ask students to think in general terms. Possible answers include: financial stories that attempt to “follow the money”; science stories that examine the efficacy of storm predictors; human-interest stories that focus on the storm’s winners and losers; “conflict of interest” stories that probe the different interests at play; and government stories that consider federal and state involvement.

b) How would you develop these angles, and what strategies might you use? As students generate answers, compile an investigative journalism “Tool Kit” on the board, which highlights questions and tactics that they can take away from class. Possible questions include: who should you talk to? Is there a systemic failure here? Are there regulatory lapses? Possible strategies include: negotiate with reluctant sources—for example, ask FEMA for zip codes if it won’t provide the full names of aid recipients; and freeze frame the story, thinking about what happens and who is involved at each stage to generate ideas about possible leads and sources.

c) How did the reporters build the story? What was their first clue? Would you have looked at the FEMA map and spotted the story? What would have led you to connect the dots, and what does that reveal about using documents? Encourage students to question all forms of information as potential sources and leads, even if they do not initially seem relevant. Also, use the example of the *Sun-Sentinel* reporters, who only fully understood the importance of the FEMA aid applicants map when they compared it to weather maps, to stress the importance of comparing data sources.

d) How did the reporters prove their suspicion of wrongdoing? The journalists asked FEMA general questions to confirm their suspicions, without giving away their angle. Telling a source the direction that your story is likely to take can help clarify information, but can also backfire.

Ask students to consider the strength of such a strategy. Prompt them to think through steps that the journalists took in their investigation—including approaching city officials, visiting storm-hit areas, and finding Miami-Dade aid recipients—in order to illuminate the reporting process and generate discussion about strategies to circumnavigate uncooperative officials or missing documents (such as the FOIA-requested material).

e) The newspaper published a first article that raised concerns and questions about FEMA-distributed aid but did not make direct accusations or present a definitive conclusion about what had taken place. Do you think the *Sun-Sentinel* was wise to print an article at this early stage? What other options did it have? Parlay such questions into a discussion about receiving tips from the public, consideration of what kind of strategies or stories are likely to elicit public feedback, and factors that incline audiences towards providing journalists with leads.

f) The reporters filed FOIA requests asking for full information about aid recipients, but risked delay and rejection in doing so. Should they have filed a more limited FOIA request from the start, which could have expedited the process? Weigh the pros and cons of each strategy.

g) What strategies did the journalists use in the housing projects to uncover information? What were the merits and drawbacks of their techniques, such as using anonymous sources?

h) How did the journalists discover the FEMA inspectors' identities? Students should consider the role of simple Internet searches in the story, and the importance of using key terms to procure relevant information.

i) What were the benefits and drawbacks for the paper in pursuing the story on a national level? Instructors can make the case for both scenarios and take a class vote; have two students argue for and against taking the story national, with remaining class members voting for their favored position; or have a class-wide debate with all students putting forward their views.

Suggested Readings

Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. *All the Presidents' Men*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974.

SYNOPSIS: This journalism classic tells the story of *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward and their investigation into what would become the Watergate scandal that eventually toppled President Richard Nixon. Their work helped inspire a generation of investigative reporters and was a defining point in American journalism.

Sarah Cohen. "Lessons From America—A Newsroom Experience," (Chapter 2) in *Investigative Journalism in the US and Sweden: Lessons from the Low Countries*, by Bo G. Anderson, Sarah Cohen and Torbjorn von Krogh, ed. by Dick van Eijk, Amsterdam: Vereniging van Onderzoekjournalisten (VVOJ), 2003. (PDF)

SYNOPSIS: This accessible article by Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter Sarah Cohen discusses the kinds of investigations that US investigative journalists have done in recent years, and examines the use of documents and other strategies in the quest to uncover wrongdoing.

James S. Ettema and Theodore S. Glasser. *Custodians of Conscience; Investigative Journalism and Public Virtue*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1998.

SYNOPSIS: This book by Communication Professors Ettema and Glaser is founded on a paradox: American journalism prides itself on being unbiased and “objective,” and yet investigative journalism is often based on outrage and calls for justice. The authors explore this seeming contradiction in a series of chapters that draw on interviews with investigative reporters and examples of their work.

Poynter Online, Investigative Reporting Bibliography

SYNOPSIS: This online section of the journalism education-focused Poynter Institute provides a useful list of reading material related to the techniques, history and challenges of investigative reporting. http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=1193

Bruce Shapiro, “Striking Through the Mask,” (introduction) in *Shaking the Foundations, 200 Years of Investigative Journalism in America*. (ed. Bruce Shapiro), Nation Books, 2003.

SYNOPSIS: “Striking Through the Mask” offers a quick historical survey of the field and examines the ethos and mindset of investigative reporters in an attempt to answer the question: Why do they do what they do? The book for which the article serves as an introduction is a useful resource for instructors seeking examples of investigative journalism over the decades. The anthology draws together a diverse range of practitioners of the muckraking tradition from the revolutionary era to the present, including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, I.F. Stone, Rachel Carson, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.

Various authors. “21st Century Muckrakers.” *Nieman Reports*, Spring- Fall, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: This multi-part series produced by the Harvard-based *Nieman Reports* provides an excellent resource on investigative journalism. Elements include online photo galleries, and explorations of investigative journalism during war, at a metro and local level, and of Washington. Examples of specific articles include “Investigative Reporting: Keeping It Relevant, Keeping it Local”; “Determining the Reliability of a Key CIA source”; and “Investigative Reporting on Iraq: From Beginning to End.”

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