

## Brian Denzer

5519 Camp Street ♦ New Orleans, Louisiana 70115 ♦ 504.344.3366 ♦ [briandenzer@yahoo.com](mailto:briandenzer@yahoo.com)

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Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks  
Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street, SW, Room 7-C737  
Washington, DC 20554

Dear members of the Hurricane Katrina Independent Panel:

After reading this testimony, I'm confident you'll agree that solving the emergency communications problems which were tragically brought into sharp relief during Hurricane Katrina really requires much more than a strategy of simply investing enormous resources in large infrastructure projects, but also requires a much more nuanced appreciation of the powerful potential available in smaller community-based, community-owned, and community-operated communications infrastructure.

In almost ten years of serving the New Orleans community at WTUL, a small community radio station licensed to the Tulane University Board of Administrators, I am uniquely qualified to speak to the advantages and disadvantages of both large corporate radio, and small non-profit radio.

The existing communications framework failed during Hurricane Katrina because huge national press teams were roaming the streets, or overflying neighborhoods, reporting on what they witnessed as a spectacular tragedy without providing any spatial reference to what neighborhoods they were in, and reporting hearsay without validating their sources.

Rather than serve the victims they were filming and interviewing, they were instead serving a corporate agenda to get the most sensational stories on the airwaves before their competitors. Rather than address the needs of the communities which they knew nothing about, and whose members they didn't care about on a personal level, the national press was on the prowl for the biggest tragedy they could find. The bigger the tragedy, the more heartbreaking and salesworthy was the story. People in New Orleans, especially in such a tragedy, are not inclined to trust outsiders, and given a spotlight, they might be inclined to exaggerate their living conditions.

Meanwhile, there remained in or around New Orleans, a highly-dedicated crew of experienced radio personnel from WTUL New Orleans who could have provided a vital service to the community -- were the station made available by the licensee. Although the control room, transmitter and tower remained unscathed and could have been made fully operational with a generator, Tulane University didn't appreciate the enormous service to the community that could have been provided by trusted voices in the community, relaying information to the community from members of the community, about what was happening in particular, and *in specific neighborhoods*, so that a much clearer picture could have emerged about where hazards were emerging, and where people desperately in need of rescue were located.

After the hurricane, Tulane still didn't recognize its vital, and legal, FCC responsibility to use its license to serve the community. In fact, it wasn't until a core of WTUL staff and interested community members became organized around the goal of getting the station operational that an ad-hoc arrangement was set up using a studio in a coffee house – independent of the Tulane administration.

WTUL then began broadcasting Community Gumbo, a forum for voices in the community being left out of the rebuilding planning process, and began airing announcements about neighborhood planning meetings and other essential recovery news and information.

It was despite the obstacles of getting back into a destroyed city, despite the access restrictions, despite the technical hurdles, that a dedicated group of community members did what citizens and patriots have always done throughout the history of the United States: They organized themselves into a collective group with a common goal for self-protection and preservation. They exercised that most fundamental right to free communication. The powers that be were actually a hindrance to the exercise of that freedom. Almost nothing could be more important. What if a Cholera or Yellow Fever outbreak had occurred? How would that information have been disseminated, and would the alarm be appreciated as the standard hyperbole of hyped up sensationalist press reports began to deaden the public's response, or would trusted community members themselves be the best messengers to get the news out?

I would further argue that community organizations need to be in charge of their own broadcast facilities because they may have access to information that larger commercial organizations simply do not have. There may have been, for example, safe places of refuge for people to go to other than the squalid "disaster shelters of last resort." There were, in fact, parties being conducted in dry areas of the city where people were emptying their refrigerators and freezers to feed anyone who needed food and water. Was there possibly a smarter and less expensive manner to address some of the community's needs before a humanitarian crisis developed at the Convention Center?

Moreover, I want to suggest to the esteemed members of the Hurricane Katrina Independent Panel that they consider a much broader definition of "homeland security." I spoke to a man who lived near Lake Pontchartrain. He knew his neighbors well, and lost many of them to flooding. He criticized the lack of attention by the federal government to protecting New Orleans neighborhoods and citizens from the deadly threat of water, breaking into tears and groaning, "If that isn't homeland security, I don't know what is!" It's true that the New Orleans community has, by and large, invested too much trust in the engineering standards of the Corps of Engineers and the oversight of the Orleans Parish Levee Board. Nevertheless, it is also true that the traditional commercial print and broadcast organizations were asleep at the wheel in bringing to light the deficiencies before it was too late.

I contend that the vigilance required to prevent such disasters from happening again requires a highly competitive and independent media – something that has been dangerously eroded in the last ten years (or more). The United States requires – and this is not an option – absolutely *requires* robust, local, independent, community-operated and community-owned investigation and information dissemination organizations in order for our democracy to serve its highest purpose.

The simplest, least expensive form of information dissemination is radio.

I further argue that emergency communications is required well beyond the occurrence of a disaster, and is required far into the rebuilding process.

Some critics might say, "But what about the United Radio Broadcasters of New Orleans? Didn't they step up to the plate to perform an essential information service?" To which I would answer yes, but only to a point. I took issue with, for example, the implied soft bias in the questions asked by United Broadcaster hosts of guests who had their own private (profit-seeking) agendas to promote. I was appalled to hear frequent discussions about the Baker Bill without anyone asking what seemed to me to be the most essential question to ask: Why is 60 percent the magic number to compensate residents for their damaged homes. Why not 100 percent. My distrust was founded upon the belief that Rep. Richard Baker, being a real estate developer himself, had authored a bill to buy low and sell high, building an empire of

profitable companies on the pain and suffering of hundreds of thousands of New Orleanians. I could have been wrong, but in my inquiries to both WWL and Rep. Baker's office, I could never secure an answer to that fundamental question.

Oh ... then there's the issue of "green space." I conceived the idea for WTUL's Community Gumbo when I first heard the talk by "New Urbanist" planners that some areas of the city would be turned into green spaces – meaning, of course, that some people's houses would be bulldozed and never be rebuilt. It was clear to me that none of those planners talked to the people who lived in those neighborhoods – many of which contain the strongest networks of families and friends that I've ever known. I rode a bus through the Lower Ninth Ward before it was open to freely move around. Every single person on that bus was able to point out someone they knew on any given block as the bus rolled by. Now, I have friends scattered around the city, and I know a couple of people on my block, but I would never be able to do what I saw residents of the Lower Ninth Ward do over a 200 square block area. The voices of those people need to be heard before planning decisions are made that will affect their lives. When planners don't consult them, they need to have a forum for their voices to be amplified until they are included in the discussion about the fate of their homes, their lives, and their families and neighbors.

Finally, allow me to further broaden the concept of homeland security to include not just protection from terrorists and natural disasters, but from the crime and violence that plague neighborhoods. Before Hurricane Katrina, I guarantee that the number one concern for most New Orleans residents was not a terrorist attack or a hurricane, but whether your son or daughter, husband or wife, was going to be caught in the middle of a gun battle. Communities can be empowered by giving them the means to talk about those problems. There's another benefit. Many students don't respond well in a classroom environment, and might excel given an avenue of pursuit for learning that challenges them to focus on improving communication skills, researching and interviewing to write stories for broadcast, learning how to edit stories on computers, and learning about the science of broadcasting. I am convinced that giving broadening community access to radio broadcasting will create alternatives that keep more of our at-risk youths out of lives of crime, leading ultimately to true homeland security. Hope is the goal. Radio can be part of the answer, here, and around the world.

For all of these reasons and more, I implore the Hurricane Katrina Independent Panel to consider in its recommendations to the FCC the need to at least support LPFM, or to open up other avenues of broadcasting access for community-operated radio stations on AM and FM.

Respectfully,  
D. Brian Denzer