



New Orleans Post-Katrina: the Uses of the Web in Times of Crisis

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What is the role of the internet media, particularly blogs, in mobilizing action in the aftermath of a major disaster? Jean Samuel Bordreuil examines the case of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina and demonstrates the importance of these resources not just in organizing initial aid, but also in sustaining momentum for the mobilization of civic action.

How does a population hit by a disaster mobilize the digital resources it possesses in order, first of all, to deal with the immediate effects of the disaster, and secondly to pave the way for recovery and reconstruction?¹ What is the role of digital technology in the development of movements that are likely to influence and change policy? Our investigation into post-Katrina internet use seeks to answer these questions. We shall see, in turn, how different means of communication, from text messages to online newspapers and from forums to blogs, have assisted and supported the organization of local inhabitants, initially in the face of the immediate crisis, and subsequently in the context of social mobilizations during the reconstruction process.

A lifeline in the midst of an informational disaster

Initially, it was the palliative, rather than innovative, dimension of internet use that emerged amid the chaos of Katrina. As J. Sutton *et al.* (2008) remind us, “natural disasters are often also informational disasters.” On the one hand, the majority of communications structures were destroyed by the hurricane; and, on the other, most residents were scattered elsewhere, having evacuated the city. This meant that all the key components for basic communication had disappeared at a stroke. Sometimes telephones would work, sometimes they wouldn’t – for instance, it was possible to make outward calls from the city’s 504 area code, but not to receive incoming calls. Alternatively, cellphones would no longer work (as transmitters had been blown down), except for text messages (assuming, of course, that one had managed to charge one’s cellphone in the first place). Correspondence via email worked well, provided that access to a laptop computer was available, which was obviously not the case for all evacuees. Somewhat ironically, there was a significant switchover to digital technologies at this time, in order to provide temporary solutions, using whatever expedient was available in the absence of anything better. People turned to modern solutions in an effort to restore traditional means of communication. The use of text messaging illustrates this perfectly: following the disaster, texting became something of a “grandmother’s trick,” whereas up until then it had largely been the preserve of their grandchildren. As a result, in the emergency plans drawn up for future disasters, community groups (such as the Broadmoor Improvement Association) put “texting” training courses for senior citizens at the top of their lists.²

1 The work from which this article is derived was financed by the project ANR 07-BLAN-0008-2.

2 Information communicated by LaToya Cantrell, President of the Broadmoor Improvement Association (BIA). See also “Broadmoor better than before”, the first reconstruction plan for the neighborhood, published on 17 July 2006,

Turning to online resources in this way meant that email was to play a key role – indeed, even an excessive role for those who, in this geography of post-disaster anxiety, took on the task of being – in their own words – “information hubs.” Those people whose address books were fullest found themselves relaying requests and delivering news concerning properties and goods, and, above all, concerning loved ones, family and friends, tirelessly clicking the “Forward” button.

From rescues to returns: forums – new organizational platforms

At this point, existing local public websites began to relieve the pressure on these individuals by providing an alternative route for interpersonal communications, which would gradually gain in efficiency, in the form of forums. The greater visibility of messages posted on forums increased the chances of senders and intended recipients making contact with one another.³ To this end, NOLA.com – the online version of the local daily newspaper, *The Times-Picayune* – opened up its forums as lifelines for people to cling to in the hope of obtaining news of their loved ones.⁴ Furthermore, as the website collated data by neighborhood, it provided a numerical representation of these neighborhoods, which heartened many readers in a general context characterized by the information dilution that prevailed in the fall of 2005.

This public renewal of broken ties could be found on other, quite different, types of website, too. For example, in the musicians’ community (which is considerable in New Orleans), cultural and musical websites were converted into information hubs (Shklovski *et al.*, 2010). However, such hubs were sometimes created and managed by a single person. For example, in the Lakeview neighborhood, Denise Thornton started a Yahoo! group and set up her home as a neighborhood center, including a mini-business center with IT facilities.⁵ This was important, as, in the midst of an informational catastrophe of this nature, the reconstruction of an “information ecosystem” is essential to post-disaster recovery. It should be noted here that it was often those people who found themselves at the hub of these kinds of activities that were best placed for the organizational work ahead.

Another point to bear in mind is that these forums, whose role was vital in the “rescue economy” (as they transmitted numerous distress signals), would also take on a key role in the “returns economy”; that is, the return of residents and, with them, the return of the neighborhoods themselves. The anxious initial questions – Where are you? – would be replaced by more generic questions – What stage are we at in the neighborhood? – or practical questions: What do we need to do to get power lines repaired? Or to get garbage collected? Or about this house, in the heart of the neighborhood, that’s falling down? What about schools? What do people know about FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) procedures for damage compensation? In fact, all the neighborhoods with returning residents structured their operations around such forums: the Web became an essential tool for organizing collective action. Indeed, neighborhood associations would consistently use the internet for disseminating useful information, particularly during the impressive wave of participatory planning that would dominate city life in spring 2006.

Let a hundred blogs blossom: a new architecture built on public words

Although forum-type sites abounded online, the Web also started to host other sites that, at first glance, appeared to have little to do with collective action or the organization of such action; these

p. 320.

3 A survey carried out by Procopio & Procopio (2007) among 1,172 web users in the two months following the disaster gives an idea of the intensity and interactivity of visits to these forums: more than three quarters of these users visited them, with over half (54 %) posting messages.

4 This resulted in a fivefold increase in traffic to NOLA.com, according to Jarvis (2005).

5 Denise Thornton, video document: “Rebuilding New Orleans – Beacon of Hope”. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ZQj4Mmp0zY>.

sites were weblogs, or blogs. Since 2003, various applications had made creating blogs a simple affair; indeed, this type of site had already been tested by a dozen or so New Orleanians before Katrina. However, the months that followed the hurricane would see the number of bloggers soar, giving rise to a local blogosphere that would stand the test of time.⁶ How are we to account for the emergence of this online “community,” and how can we determine exactly who makes up this community?

In principle, at least, starting a blog is just about as far removed from a collective commitment as it is possible to get. After all, surely blogging is simply a commitment to oneself, a resolution that concerns only the person who made the pledge to keep a weblog in the first place? Of course, logs of this nature are not without constraints: on paper, one makes a commitment to put pen to notebook; with an electronic medium, one commits to publishing posts and following up these posts with others on a regular basis. It is doubtless this task of recording the effects of time – the log entry or chronicle being the smallest available unit for this sort of record – that creates an initial resonance between blogs. Or, to put it another way, these online chronicles record and present such times of difficulty and recovery with a certain synchronicity. For example, Maitri,⁷ an influential and pioneering blogger, started dating her posts from a designated Day Zero, namely 29 August 2005, the date of the disaster. The rest of the “Bloggers’ Republic of New Orleans” would align themselves with this new calendar: whatever they lived through and experienced, they would live according to this shared time frame. One month later on Day 32 (29 September), Loki, who had launched a shared blog⁸ six months earlier, acknowledged this burgeoning collective and outlined the tasks that it would be facing in these most difficult of times.

“By Loki on September 29, 2005

Humid City started out as an entertainment and events site for the local New Orleans area; since the advent of Katrina it has evolved into a networking point for refugees to share resources, discuss our future, and mobilize as activists to ensure that the governmental malfeasance on all levels during this disaster does not escape accountability. There is one aspect that has been neglected recently which I view as being just as important: oral history.

This is history. I believe that it is important that we document our thoughts and feeling as things progress. Personal stories and viewpoints need to be recorded now, while they are still fresh. Unlike previous generations we can create an inside view of what this time has been like for the people in the middle of it, not just the dry perspectives of those writing books about it from a distance.” [Extract from Loki’s blog, humidcity.com]

This extensive program assigns blogs some of the collective missions (e.g. organizational tasks, militant critique) already covered by forums. However, Loki considers these tasks from a perspective that is specific to blogs, namely the “oral history” aspect that characterizes them. The question was, what kind of collective – which he appeals to here – is this likely to give rise to?⁹ And, moreover, what kind of relationships will this unique public sphere maintain with other spheres of collective commitment that cohabit the recovering city?

6 “Nolobloggers”, a site that has since migrated to Facebook, recorded more than 100 affiliated bloggers in 2008. If all blogs run by residents were counted, the total would no doubt be higher, but the important point here is to have an idea of how many bloggers participate in the online community (“blogosphere”) – *i.e.* those whose blogrolls (which on average contain 30 or so links) link to other residents’ blogs. We know that the concept of the blogosphere is more suggestive than analytical; we also increasingly heard that blogging was a trend that had gathered considerable pace and moved to another level. The density and durability of the local blogosphere merits further attention.

7 <http://vatul.net/blog>

8 <http://humidcity.com>

9 Another crucial blogger on the city’s online scene, Alan Gutierrez, talks about a *collective notebook*: see <http://thinknola.com>, archives from September 2005 and February 2006; this also gives us an idea of the organizational investment made by this blogger, whose site has not been updated since August 2008.

Karen Gadbois: from the *Squandered Heritage*¹⁰ blog to the online journal *The Lens*¹¹

To talk of oral history as a unique feature provided by blogs is simultaneously accurate and misleading. It is misleading if we reduce the work of the blogosphere to the function typically occupied by oral history, i.e. something that we save from the waters of the past, which we can return to later. However, it is accurate if we consider orality to be the active ingredient that drives the blogosphere. In this context, the blogosphere triggers a lively and impatient dynamic in which one orality attracts others, to the point where certain voices find their place and, as they develop further, ultimately draw the strength to make themselves heard in the public arena and, in the case of New Orleans, blow the whistle on dubious goings-on. Karen Gadbois's blog is one of the best examples of this phenomenon.

The sort of commitment to recording things while they are fresh that Loki talks about – identifying and noting events and occurrences as they happen – takes on a darker aspect in Karen's blog. The path that would take Karen into the blogosphere had its roots in her daily travels around her neighborhood – an area which she knew like the back of her hand and for which she had great affection, “even for its potholes,” which she had learnt to expertly avoid over time. However, the image she had of her neighborhood was gradually eroding: the blue house on the corner disappeared overnight; other similar disappearances abruptly changed the landscape and its landmarks, twisting the knife in the open wound left by Katrina. Karen obstinately photographed these changes and posted shot after shot on Flickr, a photo-sharing website, under the username Apricot, after the street where she lived. For this reason, she describes the blog that she started up as a kind of “elegy.”

For Karen in particular, each day that passed was marked by the things that disappeared, such as the houses demolished by order of the city council. Katrina was now long gone; the city had not completely disappeared, but other, more insidious processes were under way, slowly turning the disaster into a cataclysm.

However, the first posts on her blog also spoke of sadness tinged with more than a little anger, initially targeted mainly at absentee landlords who either took no action in the face of these demolitions or, worse still, saw demolition as an opportunity to serve their own ends. In this respect, they resembled the total cynics portrayed in Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* (2007) – except that the “disaster profiteers” in New Orleans did not perhaps have quite the same profile. Closer examination of this phenomenon was necessary. This led her to discover, for example, that absentee landlords were often also (indeed, first and foremost) absentee residents who had fled the city in the wake of Katrina and the resultant lack of employment and school closures. These guilty parties were perhaps just as much victims as everyone else. In fact, it appears that, in far too many cases, no one (i.e. none of the authorities in charge of the relevant procedures) had informed landlords that their property had been destroyed. Accordingly, the focus of Karen's blog gradually changed, becoming a “chronicle of unannounced disappearances” and something of a warning bulletin.

Through the demolition notices that she published, her blog became increasingly well-known. Furthermore, Karen Gadbois's approach spread, particularly among neighborhood forums, which took up the baton at local level. At the same time, though, Karen also became something of an investigative journalist: the first prickly issue she tackled involved revealing a list of 1,700 houses that had been placed on an “imminent danger demolition list” without any prior warning being given to many occupants. This first affair was taken up by the *Wall Street Journal* on 9 August 2007.¹² She then had to look into the procedures that endorsed and prepared these demolitions. Who takes the decisions? How are the committees responsible set up? How are demolition orders issued? Karen's investigations now took her on to the city's streets and halls and

¹⁰ <http://www.squanderedheritage.com>

¹¹ <http://www.thelensnola.org>

¹² For more information, in addition to the posts from summer 2007 on *Squandered Heritage*, please see the following websites: <http://thinknola.com/post.karen-wsj/> and http://www.firstdraft.com/hurricane_katrina/page/2/.

into official meetings where the committees in question were due to sit. Her role as a public investigator was now twofold: it involved not just exposing “affairs,” but also closely following events in official circles to make sure that statements made by public representatives became truly public, by being made known to the populations concerned. Considered a “troublemaker,” she became a feared figure in the corridors of City Hall – and all the more so after revealing another scandal, this time concerning bid-rigging for the rehabilitation of threatened heritage sites. As an additional aggravating circumstance, Karen carried out this investigation in close collaboration with the local station of a national television network.

Loki talked about ensuring that government action (and malfeasance) on all levels does not escape accountability. Mission accomplished in this case, then, but with an added extra: the imposition – and actual implementation – of new procedures that would increase the public’s control of decisions taken on its behalf. This is one of the political effects of Karen Gadbois’s actions. Today, these actions continue in the form of a new challenge that Karen has given herself since the start of 2010: launching – with the assistance of other bloggers – the city’s first “pure player,”¹³ *The Lens* (thelensnola.org). This time, she has carefully prepared her media plan and has teamed up with mainstream media (the television station mentioned above, as well as the weekly newspaper of reference among the city’s African American population, the *Louisiana Weekly*). The benefits of this collaboration are, on the one hand, the pooling of investigation costs, and on the other, the guarantee that the affairs uncovered will receive the attention they deserve and will result in tangible effects. The aim of *The Lens* is therefore not so much to capitalize on a large audience as to expose political affairs in such a way as to ensure that the rules of local politics evolve in the right direction, and to impose new rules when appropriate.

Conclusion: the role of blogs in post-Katrina public life

How much does the rising importance of digital tools owe to the sort of public ecosystem in which it operates? Mutual support sustained through forums and blogs, travel back and forth between public meetings, and a presence on the online scene are all different ways of moving from one “table,” as local residents would put it, to another. In reality, due to the simple fact that these residents move around in terms of both physical geography – attending meetings where the future of the city is decided – and online geography – “sitting at the table” of various websites to discuss the same problems – a unified space takes shape where arguments are continually raised, crafted and tested in connection with the same critical issues, but where, as a result, a sense of belonging to the same population is also felt and fostered.

To describe the topology of this space where critical issues circulate, there is perhaps no better analogy than the Möbius strip. This band forms a ring, but includes a half-twist, so that if you continuously trace the “outer” surface with your finger, you will eventually end up on the “inner” surface without realizing. The same applies to the relationship between offline and online, or between the personal and the political. Where does the boundary between our online and offline lives lie? Has it not always been the case that the key property of a public space (or, at least, public spaces that are worthy of the name) is that one field of discussion can influence, inspire and be incorporated into other fields of discussion? In this respect, digital technology would appear to bring improvements in terms of degree rather than nature: it has the ability to effect action more quickly (from link to link), and to “cross-pollinate” discussions more conveniently.

Taking the example of Karen Gadbois’s blog, at what moment does the personal become political, and an elegy become a tool for mobilizing action? It is impossible to say. What we do know, however, is that there is no need for the theoretical fiction of a leap (from individual to collective) that uproots bloggers from their attachments so that they might finally obtain the same objectivity

13 In the internet economy, a “pure-play” enterprise is one that is entirely online-based with no links to any company from the so-called “traditional economy”.

as debates in the public space. Perhaps the political aspect is an affair of the heart – a heart that is sometimes heavy or even sickened, but which always continues to beat. And it is perhaps with regard to this characteristic, specific to the medium of blogs – *i.e.* knowing how to embrace and share these pulsations – that one should seek to make one’s mark in the civic mobilizations that have energized the post-Katrina city.

Turning to *The Lens*, to conclude, it is fair to say that this site performs its role as a whistleblower well. But, in addition to the (all-digital) whistle, it is no doubt advisable to also listen out for the sources of air that make the whistle sound in the first place. The critical investigation of urban policies that the newspaper is currently undertaking¹⁴ concerns measures that were previously announced and which are now actively demanded, with the questions asked typically running along the lines of “What have you done with the federal funding that we finally managed to obtain following endless participatory planning sessions¹⁵ and battles?” The investigation continues to make these voices heard, sustaining the sources of air that continue to blow the whistle.

The activating role of the internet has been extensively underlined in the revolutions that have taken place across the Arab world in recent months. With hindsight, the lessons learned from Katrina encourage the anticipation of the effects of its various uses in terms of the “second wind” that the digital media is likely to bring to social movements in the long term.

Further reading

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14 See, for example, in *The Lens Nola* of 20 January 2010 and 4 April 2011, two articles by Ariella Cohen, who, from the standpoint of the battles fought, criticizes both the Nagin administration and the new mayor, Landrieu, with regard to the wayward management of federal funds.

15 It is important to emphasize the extent and energy of this participatory action, which took place from 2006 to 2009 and which residents humorously dubbed the “planning superbowl”; Richard Campanella (2010), for his part, proposed the expression “plandemonium”.

communication technologies. He is currently finishing a research project in collaboration with Anne Lovell on the populations of the post-Katrina reconstruction in New Orleans.

To cite this article:

Jean Samuel Bordreuil & translated by Oliver Waine, « New Orleans Post-Katrina: the Uses of the Web in Times of Crisis », *Metropolitiques*, 24 June 2011. URL : <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/New-Orleans-Post-Katrina-the-Uses.html>