IMMERSION JOURNALISM

Panning for ratings gold in New Orleans

By Matthew Power

A week after the levees broke in New Orleans and the last busloads of refugees had been moved from the Morial Convention Center and the Superdome into a nationwide diaspora, the P.R. divisions of the disaster-industrial complex were at last fully deployed.

The entrance of Harrah's Casino had become a staging area for thousands of law-enforcement personnel, FEMA flacks, EMTs, insurance claims adjusters, construction contractors, and the hordes of media whose satellite trucks bloomed like a row of poppies for four blocks down Canal Street. Scientology Volunteer Ministers doled out backrubs, chewing tobacco, and cartons of cigarettes. Anderson Cooper was interviewing Dr. Phil interviewing Anderson Cooper, both men's camera crews recording the scene for posterity, rivulets of sweat running down Dr. Phil's face in the subtropical heat.

Only a week earlier, Harrah's had been the site of an encampment of hundreds of desperate evacuees who were later prevented, at gunpoint, by Gretna sheriff's deputies from escaping the city across the Crescent City Connection, a bridge over the Mississippi. Now soldiers of the 82nd Airborne in rakish berets stood in a block-long line with security contractors from Blackwater ("It's our first state-side op!"), CNN boom-mike operators, SWAT teams from Oregon, and the FDNY to get burgers and sausages doled out by the thousands by the staff of the USS *Iwo Jima*. There was enough firepower in line to atomize any looter who showed his face, but there were precious few bad guys left in town. The disorder that followed the flooding had visited upon the city a show of force unprecedented in modern American history. An Abrams tank rattled through the empty quarters of the Ninth Ward. The state's monopoly on violence was utterly reasserted.

Smoke billowed up from barbecue grills placed directly in front of New Orleans' World Trade Center. That it happened to be September 11 lent the scene an air of exquisite surreality. Two blocks away, the Morial Convention Center still smelled like an empty slave ship moored at a wharf. In flooded sections of the city, helicopters with buckets had been using forest-fire-fighting techniques to control blazes. The riverfront was a sealed security zone, but the *Iwo Jima*'s radar tower could be seen spinning lazily above the shattered glass facades of the Riverwalk mall.

The conversion of New Orleans' central business district from humanitarian crisis to full-blown media circus was near completion; it is a natural progression in the arc of any big story, an inevitable step toward national healing and reconciliation. That all present were presiding over a city of ghosts only heightened the sense, carried on the breeze from the septic and desolate precincts of Lakeview and Bywater, that those at the cookout were inside the most exclusive velvet rope in America.

I should have realized, driving into New Orleans from Baton Rouge at midnight a few days earlier, that whatever historical truth was made manifest in the destruction of New Orleans was quickly being combed over and tarted up for the cameras, and that the flashes of reality that had been broadcast to the world were already being transformed into media spectacle and political theater. At a Louisiana State Police checkpoint on I-10 just outside the city, a trooper, after seeing my credentials, walked over to her cruiser and came back with a highway vest and a Sharpie. She was collecting autographs. My voicemail filled up with military public-affairs officers who really wanted to get the press up in a Black Hawk to show just how assiduous was their response. The National Guard took news crews in the back of HEMIT missile carriers through flooded neighborhoods,

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which in the absence of almost anyone left to rescue seemed like a combination of Disney's Jungle Cruise and a fifth-grade field trip.

As happens in these situations, tragedy quickly devolved into parody. The satellite trucks cost money, news budgets were stretched tight, and there was already whispered speculation concerning the point at which the story would recede from its high-water mark like the filthy water being pumped back out of the city.

I spoke with Anderson Cooper outside Harrah's, commenting on the scrum of press that was casting about for stories in the wreckage. Cooper had earlier scolded Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu on live television, tearfully berating the self-congratulation of politicians while a rat-gnawed body lay in the street he was reporting from in Waveland, Mississippi. After that, and the quadrupling of CNN's post-Katrina ratings, theatrical advocacy became the order of the day. Network correspondents paced about in the heat in shorts and blazers, rehearsing their lines as though they were trying out for the school play. Cooper had covered the tsunami from Sri Lanka, and I had reported on it from Thailand, and we discussed the cynical nature of round-the-clock disaster coverage. As Cooper put it: "When Ricky Martin shows up, it's jumped the shark."

Martin hadn't made his appearance at the casino yet (as he had in Phuket, Thailand, a few weeks after the tsunami), but Sean Penn had come to rescue people from rooftops, John Travolta had flown in relief supplies, and Oprah Winfrey did a flyover in a helicopter. It was the hottest ticket in America, no different than the backstage passes that had been handed out at Ground Zero four years earlier, when Brooke Shields, Don King, Muhammad Ali, and Bette Midler got publicity tours of the recovery operation.

In New Orleans everyone wanted a piece of the action, and here was a humanitarian tragedy without the hassle of jet lag. The hurricane clip goes on top of the résumé. There were careers to be made and theme songs to be composed, pieces in a genre that includes what Peter Fish, a composer for *CBS Evening News*, has called "dead Pope music." What key will best express the sorrow of Biloxi or Banda Aceh?

Television, for all its immediacy and drama, is hardwired for illusion and was all too willing to make of the disaster a soap opera, with "stars" like nine-year-old Charles Evans, discovered outside the Convention Center and suited up for Katie Couric and the Emmys. The TV people inevitably reduce history to a series of bathetic tropes: the flag waving in slow motion, the rescued puppy, the evacuee given the star treatment of American Idol. *And next on* Larry King Live, *Deepak Chopra on healing shattered spirits*.

Consider the following scene, which I witnessed after the tsunami in Thailand, in the crushed remains of the Emerald Beach Resort in Khao Lak. Stuart Breisch, a doctor from Salt Lake City whose fifteen-year-old daughter had been missing since the waves had wiped out the resort, stood in the tropical sun being interviewed by a crew from *Good Morning America*. They stood with the man whose daughter was missing and had him do multiple takes of his story. They asked him to switch angles for the light. They told him, Thank you, I think we have enough narrative. How does this all make you feel? The producer stopped the shot for a moment, hoping aloud amid the destroyed landscape that whatever he had in his eye was only sunblock. They followed Dr. Breisch and his surviving daughter from temple to temple (which had all become way stations for thousands of bodies) as he searched for his daughter. There were boards set up with snapshots of the dead to aid in identification. Breisch's daughter spotted her sister's photograph among the hundreds of mangled bodies, and *Good Morning America* was there to capture the family's moment of private horror for all the world to see. Money shot. Mission accomplished. Our work here is done. And now a word from our sponsors.

In the first days after the storm hit, it was different in New Orleans. For once at a major news event, the self-interest of the media—ratings, careers, scoops, the great television of terrible news—seamlessly converged with the larger public interest. And only in those hours when the story was so wildly out of control, when the complete failure of government to help its citizens was most apparent, did the images scream for some actual justice to be done. Geraldo and Shepard Smith and Anderson Cooper melting down on live TV was theater, yet it was in the service of a public good. But the brief reanimation of journalistic responsibility could not last: they would not stay off-script for long. The national press found its integrity, briefly, in the muck of New Orleans, but that soon led to little more than an orgy of back-patting. The veil dropped down again, and broadcast news returned to its default setting as the pornography of disaster.

What those who get their news from CNN and Fox were missing was the perspective of reporters with an intimate knowledge of what had been washed away in the tidal surge, who had more than their highlight reels at stake. Those best suited to tell the story in New Orleans were in the first days of the storm and flood in an almost impossible position to do so. About 240 staffers of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, many with their families in tow, had ridden out the hurricane in the paper's Mid-City offices—which also held the paper's presses. When the levees were breached and the water started rising, most of the staff, carrying garbage bags filled with files, climbed into newspaper delivery trucks and fled the city. They would not get the paper out on newsprint for four days, but beginning almost immediately they set up shop in Houma, Louisiana, and then Baton Rouge, and converted the paper's website into a blog, a tenuous lifeline to a scattered city that was publishing the most vital reports from the ground. On Monday night, when most national news outlets were tying a ribbon on their storm coverage and New Orleans' close call, the *Picayune*'s environmental reporter, Mark Schleifstein, had put out the first word that the levees had been breached. As many as half of the staff had lost their homes, and still they worked to put out the news. But as Jim Amoss, the *Times-Picayune* editor, later recalled, "It was very frustrating to know what we knew, and see that the story wasn't getting told to the nation and to the world."

By the time I arrived in New Orleans, a dozen reporters had set up shop in a *Picayune* staffer's house on Laurel Street in Uptown. The neighborhood was empty, with downed power lines and trees across the streets. While the national networks had portable studios set up on Canal Street in Winnebagos, they ran the lights of the house off a temperamental gasoline generator, and filed their dispatches and photographs over a single dial-up connection. The house had the curious honor of being, for the moment, the New Orleans bureau of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. The reporters and photographers bathed in a neighbor's swimming pool and ate military MRE rations liberated from the staging area at Harrah's. They slept on couches and floors, a shotgun leaning up against the wall in a corner. The neighborhood was desolate, except for stray dogs wandering past in the flickering light of a gas lamp that, strangely, still worked. A body lay on a porch under a sheet a few blocks away, and even after two weeks was still lying there, a grim barometer of the recovery's pace. The *Picayune*'s staff had accepted the bizarre circumstance of being war reporters in their own city.

The reporters had been out in what remained of New Orleans all day, navigating the landscape that *Picayune* columnist Chris Rose called a "city of melted clocks." They were being bigfooted for access by the media superstars that had parachuted into the city: Koppel strolling through the crowd by Dick Cheney's side, Ed Bradley getting a private tour with the superintendent of police. Sean Penn, a reporter was told by his handlers, was permitted to talk only to the reporter from *Rolling Stone*. Perhaps they were afraid someone might question the premise of Penn's visit.

In the evening, after filing, after the next day's news budget meeting, which had DEATH as the first item on a dry erase board, the mosquitoes came out and there was no sound in the darkened neighborhood but an occasional barking dog and the thwack-thwack of Black Hawks flying low over the city with thermal sensing devices, looking for looters or survivors. The little group of reporters smoked cigarettes on the porch and drank warm brown liquor and talked long into the night about what exactly it meant to file dispatches from the apocalypse.

The risks of staying were real. Reporter Jim Varney had spent two days after the storm with a photographer, filing from a grocery store in the French Quarter, with looters running amok outside in what he called a "Stalingrad pocket." Gordon Russell, a staff writer, had been traveling with a photographer the previous week near the convention center when they stopped to take pictures of a man who had just been shot dead by the New Orleans police. When they were spotted, the police grabbed them, held them at gunpoint, and threw their camera and notebooks across the street. When they showed credentials and had the camera returned, one of the memory chips was missing. Not, luckily, the one that contained the photos of the dead man.

Publishing online, the paper set up an exhaustive clearinghouse for essential reports from the city, recruiting volunteers, creating a missing-persons forum, and calling angrily on the federal government to come to New Orleans' aid. Their efforts were a pointed reminder of the indispensability of good local media in an era when that is neither economic nor fashionable. Running the *Picayune* was a de facto volunteer operation: the staff were told they would be paid whether they worked or not, but they stayed anyway. Mark Schleifstein, who first reported the breached levees, took little satisfaction from being Katrina's Cassandra; in a series of frighteningly proleptic articles that ran in 2002, he and John McQuaid predicted exactly why and how the levees could fail, and how many people would be left behind. And it was the *Times-Picayune*—weeks after the anchormen had gone chasing after Rita and were again tying themselves to telephone poles in the wind—that methodically debunked the rumor-mongering and speculation of widespread murder, rape, and anarchic violence that had colored much of the early television coverage with shades of racial hysteria and served to slow the pace of relief efforts. The television networks that echoed and amplified that story didn't have to stay behind and sort out the truth from the legends; their ultimate accountability was to the bottom line of ratings and advertisers.

The business of news—print and broadcast—is filled with many such ugly economic realities, and whether the *Picayune* will be able to survive in a city with a decimated readership and advertising base remains to be seen. Television, lurid and amnesiac, may drive public discourse, but this is rarely to the public's benefit. In New Orleans' loss, the local newspaper's value to the people it serves has never been more manifest. ■