

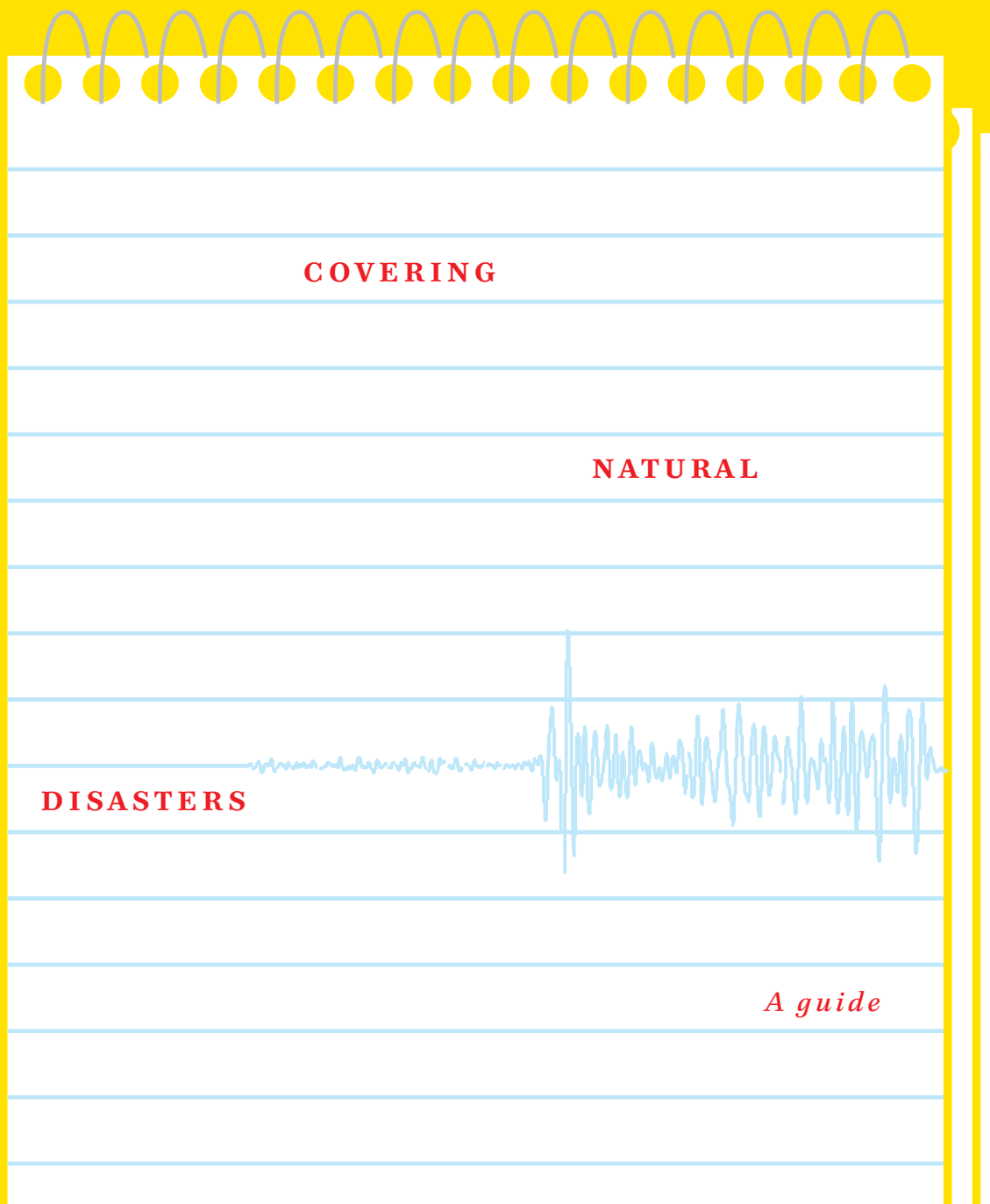
Hurricane Season
*Lessons from covering
Harvey, Maria and Katrina*

IRE Awards
*A look at the best investigative
reporting of 2017*

Warning Signs
*How alarm systems failed during
California wildfires and mudslides*

The Investigative Reporters & Editors Journal

SECOND QUARTER 2018



COVERING

NATURAL

DISASTERS

A guide



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IRE Journal

SECOND QUARTER 2018



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On our website

Learn how the Asbury Park Press investigated police misconduct across the state of New Jersey. Read our Q&A with reporter Andrew Ford at bit.ly/NJcops.

Diversity strengthens journalism – and IRE

Women made up nearly half of the 340-plus speakers this year at our national CAR Conference in Chicago. We've come a long way, indeed. Remember when the "Women of CAR" could fit at one long table in a restaurant?

As we celebrate that progress, we recognize that IRE and the news industry itself have work to do in achieving diversity in all facets: gender, race, geography and more. Our full-time IRE staff, for instance, is comprised of seven women and four men, with women holding several key leadership positions. Our progress on racial diversity has not been as strong. While one training director is African-American, the rest of the staff is white.

For NICAR18, our staff worked intentionally to tap talented women and journalists of color as speakers. Nonwhite speakers made up 30 percent of our Chicago roster.

Our IRE board and staff are committed to enhancing diversity. These are some of our new and notable efforts:

- We'll soon be making race/ethnicity a required piece of information for member profiles on the IRE website. One potential answer will be 'decline to disclose,' but we hope you will help us get a more accurate baseline. In the past, two-thirds of members skipped this category, so IRE has never known the racial diversity of its members.

- Last summer, our board of directors added several journalists of color to key committees. We've also diversified our IRE Awards screeners, contest judges and regional planning committees for national conferences. Our 13-member board has only one journalist of color, so efforts are ongoing to recruit a more diverse pool of board candidates.

- Thanks to Knight Foundation, IRE will provide 10 fellowships annually for members of the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting to attend our conferences.

- To train more journalists of color, we've expanded partnerships at our Watchdog Workshops and conferences. Recent partners include the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and The Association of LGBTQ Journalists.

- Generous donors have worked with IRE to establish diversity scholarships (bit.ly/irescholarships). If you'd like to support these efforts, consider a donation (bit.ly/iredonate). Write "Diversity Fund" in the check note field or in the "specific fund" box online.

If you have suggestions on additional ways to diversify IRE, please reach out to me directly. We're making progress, but we're nowhere near the finish line. ♦



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Q: I want to learn to code. How do I get started? What should I learn first?

A: Find a newsroom project that writing code can help you accomplish.

Want to make a data visualization? Automate some repetitive task? Scrape and analyze some data? Finding the right tool for the job can help you figure out which programming language is the best fit. “Writing a Python script to clean this campaign finance data so I can answer my reporting questions” is, in my experience, a better approach for beginners than “I want to learn how Python works.”

If you want to build a data visualization, for example, you might start with HTML, CSS and JavaScript. If your focus is data analysis, you might look into R or Python. There are a ton of online resources to help you get started and a large community of programmer-journalists who want to help you succeed. Definitely subscribe to the NICAR-L listserv and check out the News Nerders and Lonely Coders Club Slack teams.

Another thing to consider: Are there people in your newsroom who already use a particular programming language? Maybe start there — you’ll have a built-in support network as you learn.

*Cody Winchester,
Training Director*

IRE members win 2018 Pulitzer Prizes

Winners include Clare Baldwin of Reuters, John Archibald of Alabama Media Group, and the staffs of The New York Times, The New Yorker, The Press Democrat, The Washington Post, The Arizona Republic and USA Today Network, and The Cincinnati Enquirer.

Several members were also recognized as Pulitzer finalists. For a full list visit bit.ly/IREPulitzer18.



IRE partners with Knight Foundation in local TV training initiative

Regional television watchdog workshops, data boot camp fellowships for local TV journalists and a digital TV watchdog portal will be part of a three-year project of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The \$390,000 grant to IRE is part of \$2.6 million in new funding from Knight Foundation to five organizations. In its February announcement, Knight Foundation said the initiative would “help strengthen quality journalism and innovation in local television newsrooms across the country.”

Other partners include Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School of Journalism, Emma Bowen Foundation, Radio Television News Directors Foundation and The Carole Kneeland Project for Responsible Television Journalism. Learn more at bit.ly/KnightTV.

Save the dates

Don’t miss our 2019 conferences!

2019 CAR CONFERENCE

March 7-10 in Newport Beach, California

2019 IRE CONFERENCE

June 13-16 in Houston, Texas

LESSONS FROM THE STORM

Flooded buildings, frozen public records and finding sources: Three journalists reflect on covering Hurricane Harvey

When Hurricane Harvey hit Houston in August 2017, it didn't just affect thousands of homes — it also took a toll on newsrooms and journalists. Hurricanes present unique challenges, forcing reporters to balance personal safety with the demands of the job.

We asked three journalists to discuss their experiences covering Harvey, but the lessons they shared can apply to covering any natural disaster. This conversation with Lise Olsen, the Houston Chronicle's deputy investigations editor; Brandi Smith, a reporter for KHOU in Houston; and Dave Harmon, The Texas Tribune's investigative editor, has been edited for length and clarity.

How did you and your newsrooms prepare for the storm when you knew it was coming?

Brandi: Around Monday or Tuesday is when our high-level managers started having the conversation, when it really looked like this thing could cause some significant damage. Any further out, the models weren't consistent. What they were saying was going to happen was so improbable and unlike anything Houston had ever seen before.

By **Taylor Blatchford,**
IRE & NICAR

On Tuesday, managers started sending out emails: pack a bag, bring it with you. Hurricanes and tropical storms are something the newsroom watches closely, but we don't make those emergency plans until it really solidifies.

Dave: We went through a similar process. Before I was at the Tribune I was at the Austin American-Statesman as a reporter and editor, so I've been through this drill a bunch of times with hurricanes coming to the Texas coast. Like Brandi was saying, there's this 48-hour window where you're watching the storm track, you're starting to prepare. In my old newsroom, we had a list of supplies that reporters needed to have ready to hit the road and cover a disaster.

When it was obvious that it was going to make landfall and it was going to be a powerful storm, we sent two people to Houston a couple of days ahead. Fortunately, we got folks in early enough that they could start reporting as soon as they were able to leave their hotels. As I think anybody who's covered these things knows, if you don't get there ahead of time, you're probably not going to get there. You'll get stranded or you won't be able to get into town.

Lise: We had a ride-out crew here because we knew our office was going to become cut off. They brought sleeping bags, pillows, food, everything they would need. We also had people strategically deployed to different parts of the metro area, because we figured it was going to be hard as the storm hit for people to get around. Some people were in their homes, and some people were actually sent out to some pretty unsafe places. The stories, as my colleagues there know, evolved very quickly and a place you thought would be safe like KHOU's newsroom didn't stay safe.

What equipment do you make sure to have on hand when you're getting ready to cover a hurricane?

Dave: Obviously whatever clothes and personal stuff you're going to need for however many days. Rain gear. We usually have people take "fix a flat," because if you're driving through flood waters, punctured tires are pretty common. There's flares. I also tell people to take a lot of Ziploc bags, because you need to protect your cellphone, recording equipment, all of those sorts of things.

OUR PANEL



Dave Harmon is the editor for the investigative and projects team at The Texas Tribune. He previously spent 18 years at the Austin American-Statesman as a reporter, assistant metro editor and member of the investigative team.



Lise Olsen is deputy investigations editor and senior investigative reporter at the Houston Chronicle. Olsen has more than 20 years' reporting experience specializing primarily in crime, corruption, worker safety and human rights.



Brandi Smith is a reporter at KHOU 11 in Houston. She got her start at KPIC, the local TV station in Roseburg, Oregon. From there, she logged time in Boise, Idaho; Portland, Oregon; and Eugene, Oregon, before making the move to the Lone Star State.

Anything that shouldn't get wet needs to be in a Ziploc if you're going to be out in the weather.

Brandi: This was my first hurricane, but I was lucky enough to work with a photographer, Mario Sandoval, who has reported on these kinds of things before. He knew on the video side that we would need lots of little hand towels. He also thought ahead to plastic wrap the seats in the van. We lived out of it for six days, so if we'd been as wet as we were, that van would've smelled terrible. He also figured out ways to kind of MacGyver plastic around the mic so it didn't short out.

Rain gear, rain gear, rain gear. Never jeans, I learned very quickly. They get wet and you can't move in them. A bag of snacks and extra snacks. I had a bag and Mario had a bag, and he ended up giving his whole bag to a family that wasn't prepared and didn't have any snacks when they evacuated. I think you can scrap your pen and paper, your notepad, because you're never going to use it. I used voice-to-text on my phone almost exclusively.

As Dave said, all the personal stuff, the water-proof clothes, the rain boots, the toiletries, anything you might need. We lived out of a hotel for many of those days, and there was one night we slept in the van. You've got to be ready for anything.

Dave: Did y'all have an extra gas can? That's another thing we always pack.

Brandi: We did. The live trucks all have them. Luckily we never had to use it because we filled up at every gas station, whether or not we had just topped off an hour before. If we found a gas station that was open, we filled up and grabbed more snacks. You really never knew where you'd find the next open one. Stock up and gas up as often as you can.

Tell me how your newsrooms — the actual buildings — were affected by the storm.

Brandi: We were up in Greenspoint, stuck on Beltway 8 near the Imperial Valley exit, walking around, describing on air what the scene was like and interviewing people who were stranded along with us. I remember at one point I tried to toss back "Len and Mia, back to you," and I just heard "Nope, keep going," which I've never in my career been told. I'd already been going for

several minutes. I kept going, and then the producer cut in and said "They're moving us to the second floor." At that point I knew something was going on, and when they got situated up there, I was able to toss back.

We jumped back in the truck, and I pulled up Twitter, and I saw photos and videos from inside. There was water creeping into the studio, water gushing through the doors even though we had floodgates up. It was just very surreal to see, because our office is situated well above the bayou.

They moved to the second floor, and the water was still coming in at such a rate that they decided it wasn't safe to stay in the building at that point. The entire crew had to pack up and hike through knee-deep water to the Federal Reserve down the street. It devastated our newsroom physically. We're never going back. They're working on selling the building. The good news is we found a new building in southwest Houston, but we won't be moving in until early 2019. For the time being, we're stationed at Houston Public Media at the University of Houston.

Lise: In those days of rain, we were all worried about our friends, our neighbors, our own houses as we were trying to cover the storm. The

Short tips for the long haul

One-sentence tips
for covering hurricanes.

Be prepared – have fresh property tax rolls, Census demographics, flood plain maps, past hurricane data and aerial imagery of the coastline all stored in-house.

– **Stephen Doig**
Arizona State University

Secure your own home in advance, buy a solar-powered phone charger and keep rain boots and a poncho in your trunk.

– **Rick Hirsch**
Miami Herald

Don't stop asking your viewers what questions they need answered – this will provide immediate coverage and investigative opportunities down the road.

– **Noah Pransky**
WTSP-Tampa Bay

Pack in watertight containers enough batteries, protein bars, flood boots, rain gear, clothes, toiletries, bottled water and gasoline to last three to five days, along with a cell phone, tablet, car chargers, tools and first-aid kits.

– **Tony Pipitone**
NBC6 Miami

Don't rely completely on technology; during Hurricane Wilma, what we really needed was a whiteboard and corkboard where we could post things like, "I need a ride home if anyone is headed to Miami later on."

– **John Maines**
South Florida Sun-Sentinel

Always get the phone numbers of hurricane victims so you can call them back in six months, a year or even two years for the inevitable retrospective stories.

– **Dinah Voyles Pulver**
The Daytona Beach News-Journal

Look at the vulnerabilities in your community before the hurricane hits to help direct your coverage when it actually happens.

– **Matt Dempsey**
Houston Chronicle

crew that did ride out the storm in the newsroom was wading through deep water to get into the office and then some of them couldn't get out when they got there. We're much higher above the bayous, but we're also in a very flood-prone area, so the newsroom kind of turned into an island.

While you were covering the storm, you couldn't separate yourself from the suffering or the worry that you were hearing from the people you were interviewing, and that's been a tremendous challenge. We also had no set working hours. We were all just on duty until whenever we needed to be done, which meant most of us were working through a couple of months of weekends with very little rest, and being very stressed.

For me, as an investigative reporter, it was challenging to listen to, for example, the people I met in the flood pools. We now know they were living in a planned flood area of a reservoir. But when I went out there, people didn't know that. A couple of us figured that out fairly early, and we were in the position of telling people, showing them the documents and their ruined homes that proved that their city and county leaders and developers approved building their houses there. They're going through their leftover belongings that are sodden in suitcases and they can't find these disclosures. Those kinds of revelations and documents are not usually so personal and so devastating.

How did you balance your personal safety, or worrying about family and friends, with having to report and do your job?

Brandi: Thank goodness for cellphone technology, because I was able to message on Facebook or Twitter or text friends and family. The hardest part for me was not knowing about my place. I couldn't confirm until Thursday that it was okay. But you just get going and you don't focus on yourself, especially when there was so much else going on. I lost my car and I found that out pretty early, which, I mean, it was a car. In the scope of things, it was very small. I think technology has helped us in a huge way, not just in gathering information for our stories, but in making those personal connections so we don't have to worry and we can focus on the job.

Lise: Very quickly, a lake formed around my house and I realized I wasn't going to be able to get out of my neighborhood for a few days. So I started focusing on, who could I help? I was really worried about my neighbors and I wanted to make sure they knew that if they needed it, we could help them. That was part of my routine be-

*Very quickly, a lake formed around my house and I realized I wasn't going to be able to get out of my neighborhood for a few days. So I started focusing on, who could I help? I was really worried about my neighbors and **I wanted to make sure they knew that if they needed it, we could help them. That was part of my routine before I went on to work.***

fore I went on to work. I'd checked on my people so if they had to wade out of their homes, they could come and stay with us. As the days wore on, every single one of my friends had water come into their homes and had to flee. Eighty percent of the homes in our little town flooded, and when I was finally able to get out to go to a nearby shelter, I found my neighbors in the shelter with their children and their dogs. It was pretty hard to separate that worry from the focus of getting the bigger picture of the metro area.

You had to put that aside as soon as you could, though, to get into the investigation, which is always the challenge in a big catastrophe like this. We have to look for the investigative angle: What happened that should have been prevented? That helps keep me motivated. I try to be compassionate with people who are suffering and help victims and my friends, but at the same time focus on the job. Compartmentalizing was part of covering the storm.

Dave: Echoing what Brandi said, the blessing was that cellphone service didn't go down. We were able to stay in touch with our reporters on the ground, and I could check on my family and friends. If phone lines went out, I would have no idea. Where do you find a payphone in a city anymore?

Lise: A few years ago when I was in Seattle, we had an earthquake and the cellphones went out. That was even more terrifying, because without cellphones or internet, you don't know how extensive the damage is. Using social media also made it possible to do more reporting during Harvey because electricity didn't go out in most of the city.

Dave: That was a really interesting part of the storm. There were regular people realizing there were no emergency crews in their area, but they knew who needed help, and they directed other citizens to rescue people. It was really incredible what people were able to do with social media during Harvey.

Lise: For reporting, that was a great tool to try to find people. Of course, then everybody who you'd talk to would have videos and photos. People could not only tell you about their amazing escape story, they'd AirDrop you the video.

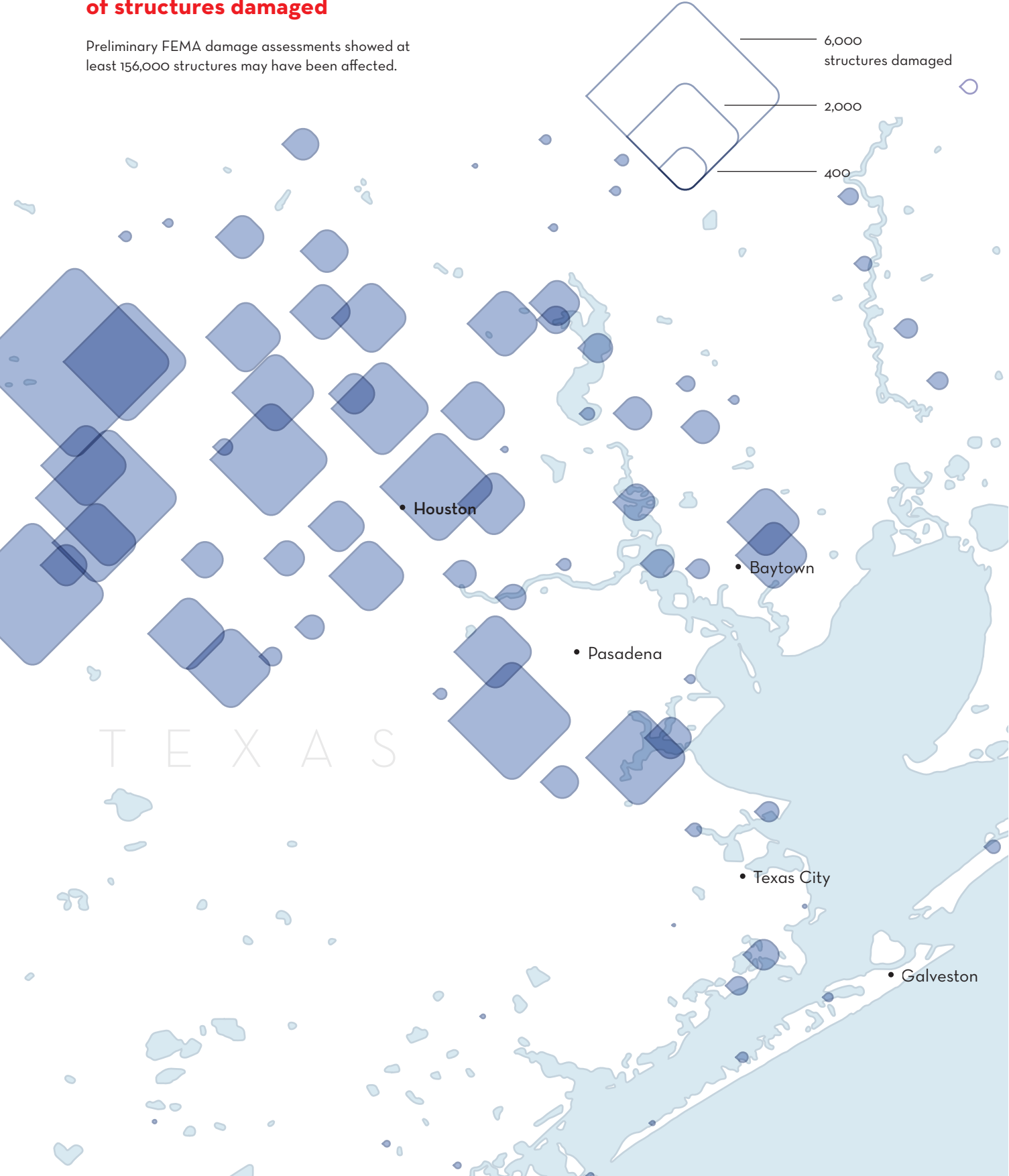
How did you balance the ethical dilemma of helping people you're reporting on?

Lise: I think Brandi should tell the story of how one of her colleagues saved somebody's life. That was a pretty amazing moment.

Brandi: Mario (Sandoval) and I were stuck on the Beltway 8 overpass, and the whole crew

After a deluge, thousands of structures damaged

Preliminary FEMA damage assessments showed at least 156,000 structures may have been affected.



had decided to evacuate the station while it was flooding. We were just walking and talking, showing people what's going on, and we'd been going for a while on our own because there was no one else to cut to. Mario suggested going over to the east side of the overpass, and he spots a truck in the water. As we got closer we could see the lights were on, the windshield wipers were going, and pretty quickly we saw movement inside and spotted this truck driver. It was clear he was not going to be able to climb higher up in the truck. Swimming would have been dangerous, and he wouldn't have been able to crawl out, either.

There was nothing I could do but get the word out. Amazingly, this sheriff's deputy truck came by with an airboat. I told the guys about him and they checked it out, put the airboat in and got him. We now know his name is Robert Roberson.

When I talked to those deputies later, they told me the water topped his truck. He wouldn't have made it if they hadn't shown up exactly when they did. My newsroom told us to just go until you find a story, and their commander told them to go until you find someone who needs help. We stumbled upon each other at the perfect time to get Robert out. I didn't even think about not intervening. That is what we're told as journalists, you're not part of the story, and I wasn't intending to be part of the story, but it all sort of blew up.

Did you face challenges getting access to agencies or records during the storm?

Lise: Yes. We were filing records requests right away with federal, state and local agencies, based on what we'd seen on the ground. One of the more memorable moments was when the Katy Independent School District told me they didn't have any records on a school because their entire administration building had been flooded and all the records had been sent to some sort of archivist to freeze them so they could hopefully save some of them. The records were literally frozen. That's the only time in my career I've ever gotten that response to a records request.

Some of the county officials were fairly quick to provide information as soon as they could find it, and I've got to praise them for that. But then some people started having lawsuits filed against them, and then the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completely shut down communication.

Dave: It was the same experience for us. A couple of our reporters had done a lot of work on

storm surge and hurricane risk in the Houston area, so they had pretty good sources they were able to go to afterwards. I don't recall us running into a lot of problems getting documents after the floodwaters had receded.

Lise, same thing with us, once the Army Corps figured out they were legally exposed, they kind of went dark. The Army Corps was a huge part of the story when it came to the flooding upstream and downstream from the reservoirs. For them not to respond was a big hole in the investigative reporting for a while.

What sort of data or resources did you find helpful to have on hand?

Lise: Hurricanes require you to be familiar with things like dams, dam condition reports and the floodplains in your area. If something else like earthquakes is a problem, know what the most vulnerable areas are. You don't want to be reading those studies for the first time after the storm.

When I was trapped in my house, one of my first thoughts was that the San Jacinto Waste Pits are probably going to leak. That's a huge storage area for dioxin, one of the most dangerous toxins, and it's buried in the middle of this river that's raging. I'd already done reporting on that, so I knew that was the federal Superfund site that was probably going to pose the most danger to our entire metro area. You don't want to be learning about that on deadline; you want to know, where are your Superfund sites?

Know those investigators and have their cell-phone numbers so if they're trapped at their houses, you can call them. Many of these offices were not open, and you had to know how to reach these people. Some of the best sources were retired government officials, some of whom had moved to other states.

Dave: Yeah, absolutely. One of the big arguments for having good beat reporters and investigative reporters is they have that knowledge base before something big happens. For us being in Austin, obviously we're also watching the local media and reading everything the Chronicle is doing because they're the experts in Houston and have the firepower with investigative reporting. A lot of the media around the state was watching what the Houston media was reporting so we could get a better picture of the whole scope of this thing. ♦

Taylor Blatchford is an editorial assistant at IRE and a recent graduate of the University of Missouri. She's currently working at Poynter in St. Petersburg, Florida, through a Google News Lab fellowship.

THE RECOUNT

Without power, water or internet, journalists in Puerto Rico scrambled to expose the country's flawed death toll in the wake of Hurricane Maria





By
**Omayra Sosa
 Pascual,**
*Centro de
 Periodismo
 Investigativo*

A hillside in Puerto Rico shows significant damage after Hurricane María.

CBP PHOTOGRAPHY
 VIA VISUAL HUNT

SAN JUAN — We were expecting a catastrophe. Days before Hurricane María hit Puerto Rico, Gov. Ricardo Rosselló said it repeatedly: The whole island should prepare for a total blackout lasting several days. We just didn't know what that really meant; it had never happened.

Hurricanes are as common to us as snow in the north, and journalists working for decades in Puerto Rico have all experienced their fair share of these natural disasters. Still, we hadn't seen anything like this Category 4 storm that covered us with 155 mph wind from coast to coast.

In less than 24 hours, 3.5 million Puerto Ricans were left with nothing. No power, no water, no communications, no internet, no fuel, no open roads, no working ports or airports, no supermarkets or places to buy food. All you had was what you had stocked at your home, if you were lucky enough to still have one standing — I was. There was nowhere to go.

I didn't know where to start. As a human being, I was concerned for my family's survival; as a journalist, my duty under these circumstances was to report what was happening. In this case, Puerto Rican journalists and our news organizations were victims, too.

When the winds started to slow down the afternoon of Sept. 20, there was only one news outlet left standing, a WAPA radio station, and not much that could be done to start to work. The streets were still dangerous from aftermath

winds and flooding. The roads were blocked with trees, power poles and debris, and the night was falling hard and pitch black over all of us.

So, how did Puerto Rico's Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPIPR) come back from this and put out in a week what has become probably the most important investigation about Hurricane Maria? Good old-school journalism, common sense and a lot of hard work on the ground.

Maria's lost victims

Three days after the catastrophe, I couldn't stand it anymore. I put on my laptop backpack and started walking toward the Telégrafo building, which was home to a fiber optic provider. I heard the company had working Wi-Fi and had opened a free hot spot for citizens trying to communicate with each other and the outside world.

I already had a story in mind, and so did some of my other CPIPR colleagues. Doctors had told me the situation in hospitals was critical. They were receiving transfer patients from some of the most damaged facilities, and most of them were in such bad shape that they died soon after arriving. They also told me hospital morgues were past their capacity. Puerto Rico's health system used to be my beat, so I knew it well and understood this was not normal.

Two physicians who spoke to me counted nine deaths among their transfer patients in only one day, in just two municipalities. Puerto Rico has around 10,000 doctors and 78 municipalities so, to me, it sounded like there was a huge problem that was costing a lot of lives. Meanwhile, Gov. Rosselló had been saying day after day on the radio that the death toll was only 16 people.

Once I was able to connect at Telégrafo, my WhatsApp flashed a message from one of our reporters who proposed we regroup the next day, wherever we could. Three more people, our administrator and I responded. We still had no news from our executive director and editor, Carla Minet. I proposed meeting at the Telégrafo building since the business owner volunteered office space to working journalists.

And so our six-member team met. An hour later, miraculously, Minet arrived in a ride she managed to hitch from her mountainous town of Ci-

dra. Citizens had cleared the roads enough for them to slip by.

Everyone pitched their stories, and we decided to establish a temporary office at a table in the government's emergency command center, where we could get phone and internet signal and where local, federal and military officials were holding press conferences. A couple hours later, we were off to work, some by foot and others hitching rides with people who still had fuel in their tanks.

That same day, Gov. Rosselló again quoted the same number: only 16 deaths. We had been lucky, he said, and he congratulated the first responders and his team for their hard work and focus on saving lives. I continued to look for direct accounts from doctors, police, rescue workers and officials I could meet at or near the command center. It was impossible to reach people by phone or WhatsApp — we had some service at the command center, but most people outside did not.

I also asked our reporters who deployed to different parts of the island to ask the same questions wherever they went: Did they know people who died because of the hurricane or its aftermath? Did they have any details about the circumstances of these deaths? Could they provide names, addresses, contacts and references that could lead us to their family, friends or documents that might help us find more information?

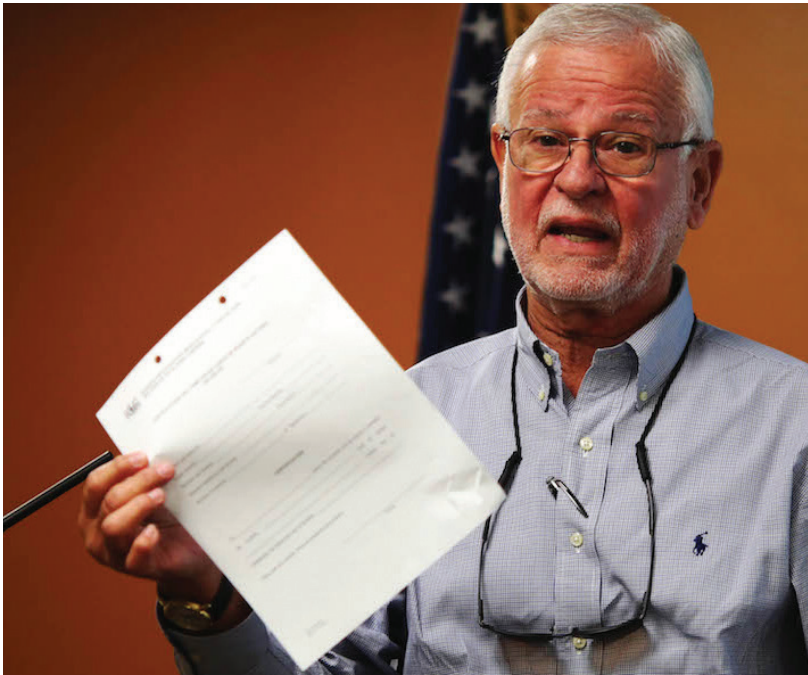
Six days after Hurricane Maria, I had documented around two dozen additional deaths and my first informal database was ready. Most of these cases didn't include names, so I had to identify victims with a trait: the town they were from, the source of the information or how they had died. Nevertheless, I started to see a trend: A lot of older people with health conditions who could not receive life-sustaining services because of the lack of electricity and communication in homes, shelters or hospitals.

That same day, Sept. 26, I saw Puerto Rico's Secretary of Health Rafael Rodríguez-Mercado walking by the command center and was able to intercept him for a short interview. He had just come back from his first trip to the western side of the island, where he visited three hospitals. He was visibly weighted. I told him what I knew already, that there were many more deaths occur-





A home in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, after Hurricane María.
CENTRO DE PERIODISMO INVESTIGATIVO



Héctor Pesquera, Puerto Rico's secretary for public safety, speaks at a press conference about the certification of deaths.

CENTRO DE
PERIODISMO
INVESTIGATIVO

ring, and asked if people were burying their loved ones in common graves, something I had heard on the streets.

He agreed and said, yes, the death toll was higher and people in the west told him about the alleged common-grave burials. Funeral homes were often unable to pick up the corpses because they had no fuel and many secondary roads were still blocked. He also admitted the government was still unable to properly certify deaths because most of the offices in charge of this task around the island were still closed.

Preventing future fatalities

We broke our first story on Sept. 28, and a lot has followed. I continued investigating and reporter Jeniffer Wiscovitch joined me mid-October to lend a hand. The task was enormous and overwhelming. Since the government had almost no official statistics and was quick to challenge our stories, we figured the only way to confirm deaths with names and evidence was to visit the towns in person and get firsthand accounts. We visited eight of Puerto Rico's 78 municipalities and documented 47 cases, most of them with names and various sources of confirmation, including testimonials from family, friends and neighbors, as well as police reports and death certificates when available.

In November, we were able to get the first set of comprehensive mortality statistics from the government and publish a story estimating that from Sept. 20 to Oct. 31 — the only data available — Puerto Rico experienced a significant spike in deaths with an excess of almost 1,000 cases only explained by Hurricane Maria and its aftermath. The next day, The New York Times followed with a story using the same data and arriving at the same conclusions.

In December, Gov. Rosselló ordered a recount of the death toll and a revision of the failed pro-

Why do we keep investigating and reporting on Hurricane Maria's death toll? The answer is simple and should have been the government's motivation from day one: to save lives.



Héctor Pesquera works with a team at the government command center located at the Convention Center in Miramar.

CENTRO DE PERIODISMO INVESTIGATIVO

cess. At first, the recount was assigned to the same people who carried out the first flawed tally. More recently, however, the job was reassigned to public health experts at The George Washington University. This study is still ongoing; preliminary results are expected in May and final results in December, after the next hurricane season.

Up to now, Wiscovitch and I have published 10 stories on CPIPR's digital platform (periodismoinvestigativo.com) that have been republished and quoted by more than a dozen Puerto Rican, national and international media outlets. Many of these media outlets followed our lead, publishing stories about the problem with the death counts. We have continued updating our database with more information and new cases, and in December, we launched a formal effort with Quartz to document as many deaths as possible through an

online questionnaire with a structured methodology reviewed by public health experts. In two months we have compiled more than 200 cases and are in the process of validating and analyzing the data. In February, CPIPR also sued the government for its full mortality database, and we are awaiting that decision.

Why do we keep investigating and reporting on Hurricane Maria's death toll? The answer is simple and should have been the government's motivation from day one: to save lives. As I write this in late March, it has been more than six months since the storm and there are still approximately 450,000 people without electricity. Some are still dying because of related problems.

Our goal is to determine what went wrong and what can be done better to prevent fatalities in the future. In Puerto Rico, it's certain that stronger hurricanes are still to come. ♦

Omayra Sosa Pascual is an award-winning journalist, entrepreneur and adventurer with 20 years of experience. She is the co-founder of Puerto Rico's Center for Investigative Journalism.

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF UNCERTAINTY

Preparing the public for unpredictable weather

Hurricanes require journalists in coastal communities to be on their toes to prepare the public for impact. To do this, many rely on the “cone of uncertainty,” a staple of hurricane-prone communities.

The cone, colloquially, has many names — “cone of probability,” “cone of error,” “cone of death” — but Frank Billingsley, the chief meteorologist at KPRC, Houston’s NBC affiliate, has a different term.

“The cone of uncertainty is what my news director calls ‘the cone of overtime,’” he said. “Whenever you’re in the cone, there’s going to be a lot of work ahead.”

We talked with journalists and weather experts about the challenges of reporting on uncertainty and gathered some best practices for preparing the public for the unpredictable.

Understanding the cone

The “cone of uncertainty” is a product of the National Hurricane Center, created by analyzing all tracking errors in the last five years and narrowing them down to the 67th percentile — meaning the center of the storm should stay within the cone two-thirds of the time.

Michael Brennan, the branch chief of the NHC’s Hurricane Specialist Unit, said the cone is getting smaller over the years as forecast errors continue to shrink. Take Hurricane Katrina, for example. Brennan said three days before the storm made landfall, the cone was almost twice as large as the model the NHC could produce for the storm today.

A smaller cone still comes with uncertainty, though. Brennan said reporters should be careful not to give people outside the cone’s direct center a false sense of security when reporting on where

By **John Sadler**,
IRE & NICAR

the storm might hit.

“The best thing you can do is avoid being too specific,” he said. All areas within the cone and even regions immediately outside of it could face effects of the storm, he said.

Mark Schleifstein knows a thing or two about hurricanes. A longtime environmental reporter with The Times-Picayune in New Orleans, he was part of the team that won Pulitzer Prizes for their coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

Schleifstein uses the cone as a tool during his reporting but said it has limitations. The cone only shows where wind will occur, and the center’s predictions on increasing or decreasing wind speeds inside the cone are less accurate.

“(Predicting intensity) continues to be a difficult problem for (the NHC),” Schleifstein said. “They continue to have a difficult time predicting when storms will likely intensify, and also when storms will become less strong.”

In low-lying New Orleans and other coastal areas The Times-Picayune serves, powerful hurricanes also produce devastating storm surges, which often occur outside the cone.

Schleifstein said the NHC now reports information on storm surges in separate maps. About five years ago, the organization added maps that give what Brennan called reasonable worst-case scenarios, backed by past forecast errors. Last year, the NHC began issuing storm surge watches and warnings for the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Schleifstein said these forecasted surges often affect communities outside the cone.

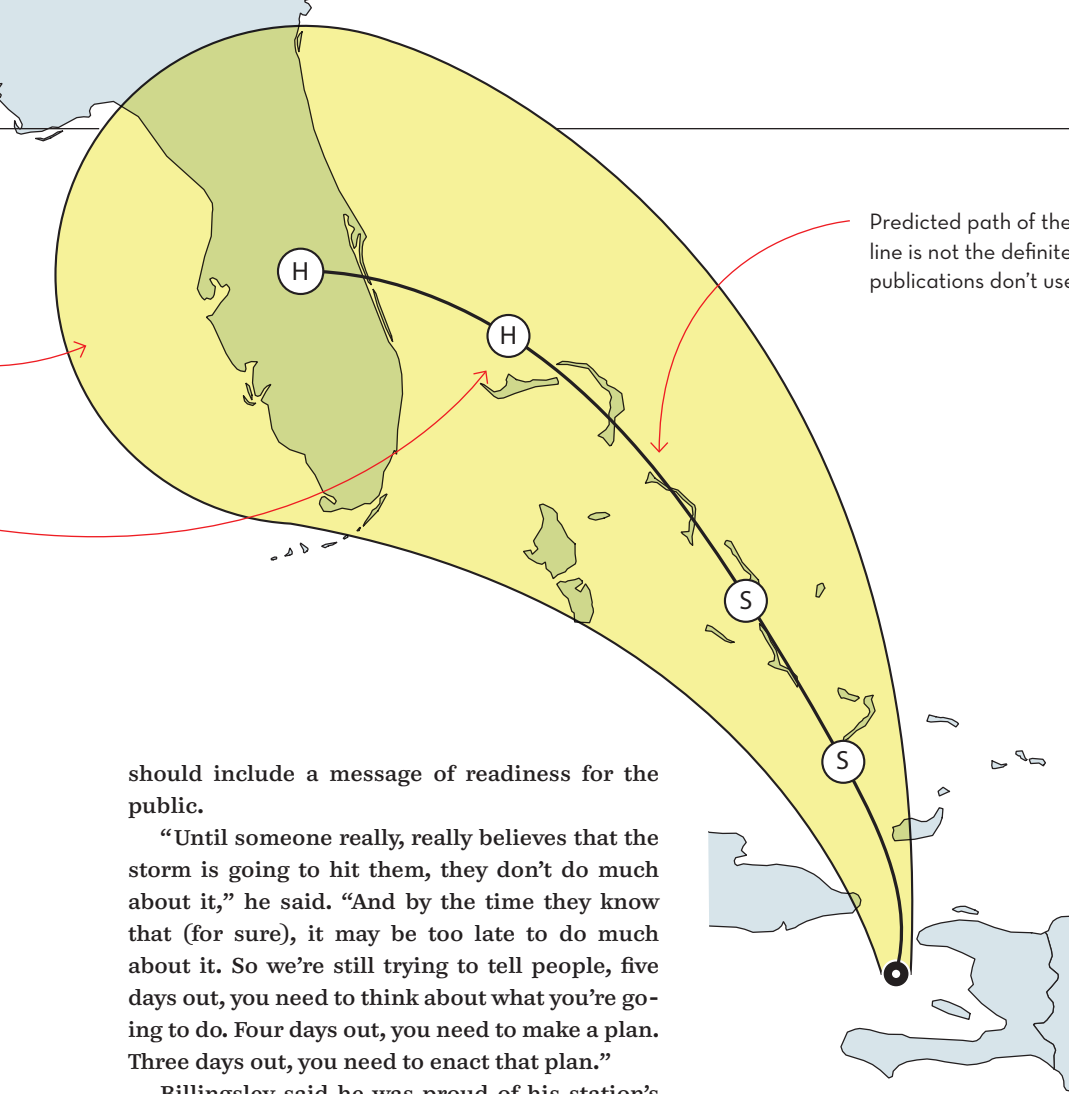
Preparing the public

Billingsley, the Houston meteorologist, said responsible reporting on forecasts and the cone



The center will remain in the cone about 66 percent of the time.

Raw NHC cone forecasts will include these points, which measure wind speed. D is less than 39 mph, S is 39-73 mph, H is 74-110 mph and M is over 110 mph.



should include a message of readiness for the public.

“Until someone really, really believes that the storm is going to hit them, they don’t do much about it,” he said. “And by the time they know that (for sure), it may be too late to do much about it. So we’re still trying to tell people, five days out, you need to think about what you’re going to do. Four days out, you need to make a plan. Three days out, you need to enact that plan.”

Billingsley said he was proud of his station’s reporting ahead of Hurricane Harvey.

“I had the guts to warn people three days out that we could see the worst flooding that we’d ever had, that 36 inches of rain would not be a surprise,” he said. “If you feel confident in your forecast, have the confidence to say it.”

Schleifstein and Billingsley said it doesn’t hurt to be overly cautious. Don’t let a lack of certainty stop you from warning vulnerable residents.

In New Orleans and Houston, the reporters said they were most concerned for new residents.

“Educating the people who haven’t been through (hurricane season) time and time again is probably our biggest challenge,” Billingsley said.

Each year, KPRC runs frequent preparedness messages educating residents on what to do in case of emergency.

Schleifstein said he targets new residents who didn’t experience Hurricane Katrina with stark language and repeated warnings. He’s gone as far as telling readers who ignore evacuation orders and remain in their homes that they should keep hatchets in their attics for quick escapes and pen Social Security numbers on their bodies for identification.

“I know those are pretty wild to put in stories,” he said, “but they tend to work.” ♦

Understanding the cone of uncertainty

The edge of the cone represents the widest probable location of the center of the storm, not the size of the storm.

John Sadler is an editorial assistant for the IRE Journal. He is a recent graduate of the University of Missouri.

Hurricane Reporting Toolkit

Chief meteorologist **Frank Billingsley** of Houston’s KPRC and environmental reporter **Mark Schleifstein** of The Times-Picayune in New Orleans share their favorite resources for reporting on hurricanes.

NWSChat The National Weather Service runs an online chat service with journalists and emergency responders to quickly exchange emergency information. You have to get permission from the NWS to participate, but Billingsley said journalist credentials will likely be enough to join. nwschat.weather.gov

National Hurricane Center and National Weather Service The NHC has a ton of educational data on current weather patterns and the overarching terminology. “You can’t report on anything you don’t understand. Understand the tropical terms, even if you don’t understand the science behind them,” Billingsley said. The NWS also has regional weather forecasts on its homepage – a useful resource for journalists reporting for a local audience. www.weather.gov, www.nhc.noaa.gov

Tropical Tidbits Billingsley recommended this website for staying on top of current storm systems, but said it was “heavy on the meteorology,” so reporters with less experience should bone up on weather terminology. tropicultidbits.com

Mike’s Weather Page Florida resident and weather hobbyist Mike Boylan runs this website, which compiles national weather forecasts and radar from multiple sources. “Everything you ever wanted to know about weather and hurricanes, Mike puts on this page every day,” Schleifstein said. spaghettimodels.com

UNDER FIRE

California officials said they did all they could to warn those in the path of deadly wildfires and mudslides. Data and documents painted a different picture.

The disasters are guaranteed. The gamble is who lies in harm's way and whether they realize it in time to run.

From October 2017 to January 2018, more than 60 people died from California wildfires and mudslides. Had they been told what officials knew about their danger, they might have lived.

Alerts were delayed. Those late warnings went to only a fraction of those in peril. Evacuation maps ignored internal risk assessments, leaving many at risk clueless to the threat. By the time mass alerts were triggered, cellphone towers needed to relay life-saving messages were down.

The Times' investigative reporting that uncovered these stories began with on-the-ground coverage of the October wildfires that caused record devastation in northern California and the January post-fire mudslides that led to record deaths along the Santa Barbara coast.

In the wine country fires, the displaced stumbled into shelters sharing their surprise at being woken by wildfire without warning. In Santa Barbara, mud-plastered victims were pulled from muck far from the pre-identified danger zone.

Contact with victims and residents in the midst of the crisis proved invaluable later when unraveling what went wrong. It was also essential to document the disasters as they unfolded — capturing screenshots of alerts and copies of agency maps and incident plans from daily briefings — before the evidence disappeared.

Emergency officials claimed they did every-

By **Paige St. John** and **Joseph Serna**, Los Angeles Times

Firetrucks monitor a blaze that threatens a retirement community along Highway 12 in Santa Rosa. The retirement community was evacuated on the second day of the Northern California fire.

GENARO MOLINA /
LOS ANGELES TIMES







Left: A fire truck responds to fires burning near homes in Montecito.

MARCUS YAM / LOS ANGELES TIMES



Center: The Montecito city sign along the 101 Freeway.

KATIE FALKENBERG / LOS ANGELES TIMES

thing they could. Proving what really happened took deeper digging.

Officials knew there was danger

Before the fire, forecasts from the National Weather Service showed northern California under a Red Flag warning for high winds and wild-fire. But equipment logs showed California's firefighting agency did not pre-stage crews and engines, and county emergency managers issued no public warnings of the potential fire siege in a state with a long history of such infernos.

In Santa Barbara County, high-risk areas were excluded from early warnings. A U.S. Geological Survey map identified fire-scarred slopes in danger of collapse in a heavy rain, but gave no information on the deadly mudflow that would follow. The county relied on that map to set boundaries for mandatory and voluntary evacuation, and garbled even that warning by detailing smaller evacuation boundaries on social media.

The county did not advertise its own risk map that accurately forecast deadly mudflows into "voluntary" zones. The risk map's existence came as a tip: Reporter Joe Serna encountered a local man riding his bicycle through the wildfire area weeks earlier and left him with his card. The man called when he found the map of the extended danger zones on the ground. County officials refused to cough up a copy, but a reporter in the field found local firefighters willing to share.

Delayed warnings

In both the mudslides and wildfires, local emergency managers insisted they did ev-

everything they could to warn those in peril. In truth, there were delays of minutes and hours. Emergency, fire and police dispatch recordings showed the precise time and progression of the fire siege, along with candid discussions that included a decision to hold off on alarms. No law enforcement agency would immediately provide those public records. The Times relied on archives of scanner radio feeds on Broadcastify (broadcastify.com), a subscription-based service.

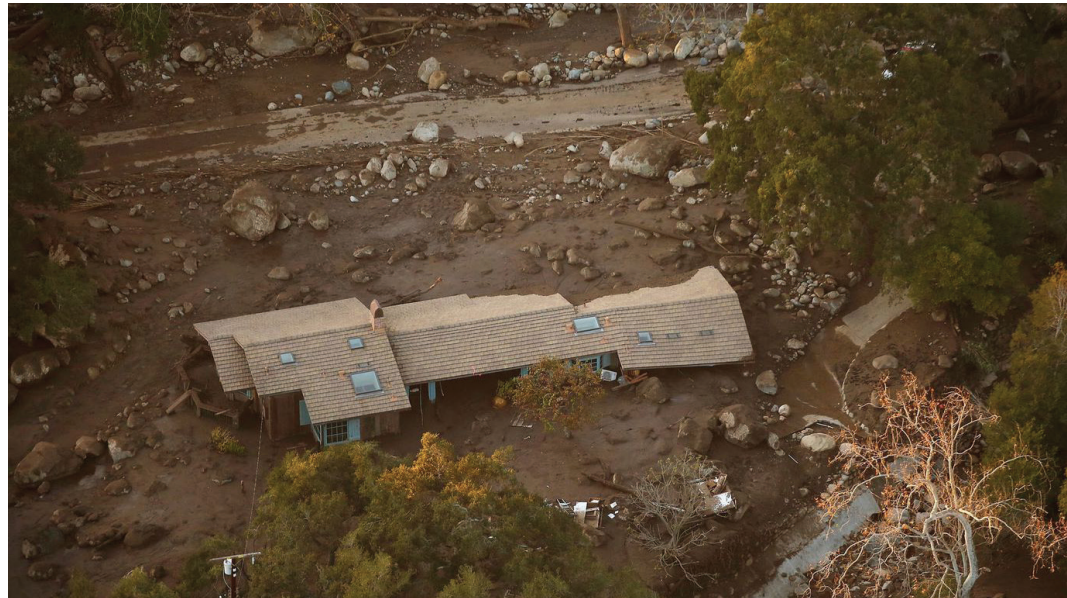
Local agencies were also slow to release copies of the exact times alerts went out, a public record. For counties that rely on cellphone text messages from vendors such as Nixle, the alerts are time-stamped and archived online. For alerts across the national wireless alert system, which pushes warnings to every cellphone within range of a participating and functioning cell tower, the go-to resource is ipawsononweather.alertblogger.com, which tracks alerts sent out by FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). The site does not capture every alert, including those from the National Weather Service.

Also look for public warning tools that weren't utilized: In our reporting, we found that the fire station air siren in one fire-struck valley was never used.

Locals blame glitches in a federal system

Most emergency managers can send warnings widely through IPAWS, a national system operated by FEMA and the FCC, which includes the old-style tones and warnings carried on radio and television.

Via IPAWS, a county can ask cellphone carri-



ers to buzz phones and deliver text messages as a Wireless Emergency Alert. The county can request targeted warnings to small areas to avoid confusion or a mass panic that might congest evacuation routes, but how a carrier responds to the request is confidential. The default is a countywide blast. Also confidential: whether cell towers were knocked out and relayed no warnings at all.

Local officials cited the inability to target a message to specific areas and other known technical issues for not using these systems. We found a trove of detail-rich complaints on the FCC's regulatory comment site (fcc.gov/ecfs). The records contained pre-disaster comments on proposed changes to federal alert regulations as well as documentation of private discussions with regulators. They highlighted weaknesses in the warning systems as voiced by county emergency officials. They also included frank comments and industry positions taken by trade groups and company lawyers who, post-disaster, were unresponsive to press calls.

Opt-in warnings leave most people out

Most emergency managers relied on privatized warning systems, which depend on subscribers and often outdated lists of landline numbers. Sonoma and Mendocino counties released call completion logs from these private systems that showed calls to landlines had failure rates as high as 50 percent. Other counties — Sacramento and Los Angeles — were able to provide pre-disaster audits of these systems.

Subscribers who provided cellphone numbers

A home in the Romero Canyon area is surrounded by mud and debris in Montecito.

AL SEIB /
LOS ANGELES TIMES

when registering for these local warning programs had higher success rates, but low participation — about 10 percent in Santa Barbara, even after wildfires. In Sonoma County, call logs gave the streets of those who received alerts. We used ArcView to map those calls against U.S. Census data to discover that calls went to fewer than a tenth of those in the path of the deadly Tubbs fire. Video from the body camera of a sheriff's deputy showed how the real word to “get out” came — banging on doors and dragging fire victims into patrol cars.

A majority of warnings came as text messages. Because public agencies use these services frequently for press releases, parade notices and other minor news, the 2 a.m. life-or-death message was apt to be ignored. And in tourist-rich California, there was no provision to include visitors in the safety net.

The dead speak

The Times is in the practice of profiling disaster victims, managing the task with in-house spreadsheets. In the fires and mudslides, we also immediately mapped locations of deaths. Reporters created simple Google Maps that matched evacuation zones, fire and mudslide reports and alert messages, and shared those with the graphics team for conversion into story graphics. The maps provided a dimensional view of how the disasters unfolded. This guided our reporting — 14 of 21 deaths in Santa Barbara were in the so-called “voluntary” evacuation zone — and made compelling evidence for readers of what went wrong, at what cost. ♦

Paige St. John is an investigative reporter and data analyst for the Los Angeles Times based in northern California.

Joseph Serna is a Metro reporter who has been with the Los Angeles Times since 2012.

50 STATES, 50 STORIES

Investigating climate change one state at a time

By **Patty Cox** and **Kevin Hayes**,
The Weather Channel Digital

Our project “United States of Climate Change” got started with a simple idea: one climate change story per state. Climate change is a core editorial concern for The Weather Channel, and we wanted to focus on “human” stories and current impacts to get past the abstract projections that can dominate reporting on the topic. We wanted to show what climate change looks like right now in America. Digging into individual states — and utilizing knowledge from people who have covered related beats — did the rest.

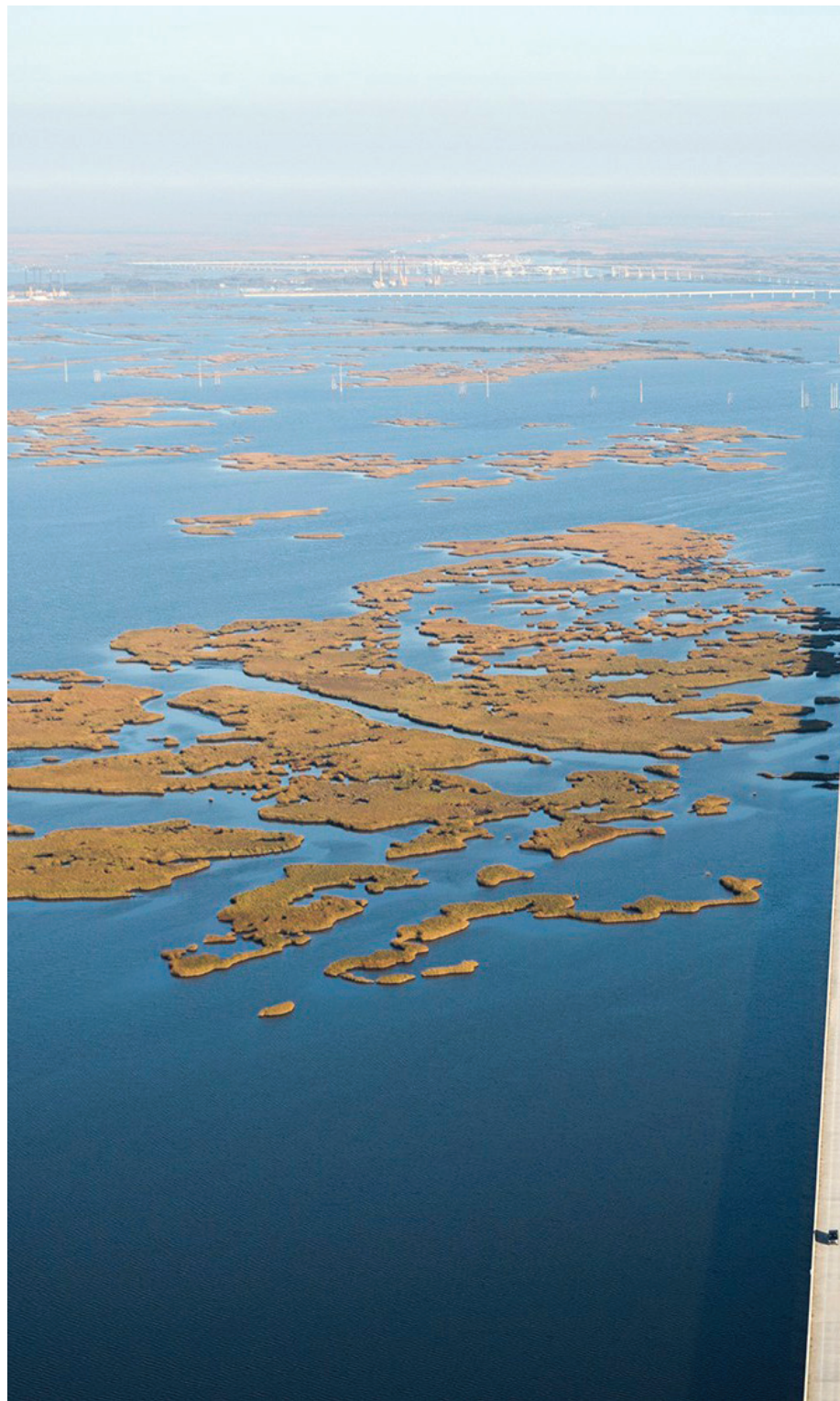
We lived inside the project for so long, and so intensely, that it’s a bit strange trying to figure out what might be useful for other reporters and editors. We have a remarkable staff of journalists and strong support from management. Editors, reporters, video producers, meteorologists and more all did work outside their day-to-day to make the project a reality.

Still, here are four things that make our project somewhat unusual, as well as some lessons we learned along the way.

The scope

There are 50 states, so when our pitch was approved by then editor-in-chief Neil Katz, we’d managed to sign ourselves up to do a 50-part series over the course of a year.

The scope created budgetary, logistical and editorial issues, but all of those ultimately rolled up into organizational problems. Project management was a constant drag. The basic mechanics of what it takes to publish a story — from soliciting and approving pitches to layout — take on strange dimensions when multiplied by 50. “Who is doing that?” was probably the question



The elevated section of Louisiana Highway 1 near Port Fourchon, Louisiana, photographed in December 2017. EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN



A look inside the investigation

In Montana...

Dry summers and violent storms are hitting Montana's barley country, causing substandard crops that bring in less money and are unsuitable for the farmers' traditional customers – beer companies.

In Mississippi...

Mosquitoes thrive in warmth and moisture, and the effects of climate change allow their populations to continually rise. Entomologists are preparing for the spread of mosquito-borne tropical diseases to temperate climates that haven't previously been affected.

In Nebraska...

Economic incentives have led some farmers to remove "shelterbelts," tree-lines planted in the 1930s to alleviate Dust Bowl drought conditions. With scientists predicting a large-scale drought in the latter half of the 21st century, Nebraska could be left without defense.

In Maine...

The region's fast-warming waters threaten its thriving lobster industry. As the water continues to warm, the underwater ecosystem will continue to change and lobsters will head farther north toward more favorable conditions. Lobsters are responsible for 86 cents of every dollar in a Maine fisherman's pocket.

In Hawaii...

Hundreds of millions of people depend on coral for food, and coral reefs drive tourist-based economies. But warming oceans are causing stress responses that threaten entire species, and scientists are working to breed "super corals" that are more resilient to the effects of climate change.



we asked each other the most. Oftentimes the answer was, “I thought you were,” or worse, “I thought you already had.”

Some nuts-and-bolts things that helped: We had a shared Google Doc with pitches, timelines and status updates. The two of us held more-than-weekly calls to keep ourselves honest. We also kept a series of notebooks with lists of journalists or potential interview subjects to reach out to, freelancers to pay and half-baked ideas to further bake.

The number of partners

We wanted a diverse lineup of 50 stories, so we pulled together a collection of truly outstanding partners. We’d worked with some of them before (InsideClimate News, The Lens), but we also reached out to new partners (The Marshall Proj-

A page from “Awaiting a Wave,” a nonfiction comic book about the Marshallese population living in Arkansas.

NATE POWELL/DALE CARPENTER

ect, Food & Environment Reporting Network) for their expertise in different subjects. We chose others, like Honolulu Civil Beat, Louisville Public Media and InvestigateWest for their local knowledge.

The exact ratio of who did what varied depending on the partner and the story. We did several stories with InsideClimate News, which involved pitches from both sides, reporting documentaries and text pieces and lots of editing.

Most of our partnerships worked out well. We had three partnerships, however, that were less than happy. These three potential stories were the victims of news cycles, circumstances and editorial concerns — all the valid and usual reasons stories don’t happen. Clearer, more constant communication might have made it evident earlier that they were unlikely to work out.

Multimedia

There are about 100,000 words in the project, about an hour of video, several dozen graphics, hundreds of photos, a radio piece, a handful of GIFs and a comic book. The photos for the series alone involved drones, helicopters, a boat, black-and-white film and some very impressive macro lenses.

The level of commitment to making a true multimedia series required substantial financial support, and Katz and current editor-in-chief Greg Gilderan found every dollar needed for the project. For each story we asked ourselves, what elements can this story support? Was it inherently visual? Could it support a video? That informed our choices about mediums, something we balanced with budgetary concerns.

The most unusual piece in the series is probably our Arkansas story, “Awaiting a Wave,” which is the above-mentioned comic book. An estimated 10,000 people from the Marshall Islands live in northwest Arkansas, and the comic looks at how some Marshallese living in Springdale, Arkansas, have growing concerns about the impacts of climate change on their islands.

Despite the novelty of the medium, the comic’s creators came on board in an utterly average way. We were both fans of the work “March,” an autobiography of U.S. congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis told as a graphic novel, so we cold-called the artist, Nate Powell. He had roots in Arkansas and told us about documentary filmmaker Dale Carpenter, who wound up being willing to report out a comic book. Ah, the magic of things just working out.

We used Storyhunter, a matchmaking service for visual storytellers, to find and hire freelancers



here and there, and of course, Google is an asset for finding talented people in unfamiliar places. Still, many of the stories came together by picking up the phone (or dashing off an email) to former colleagues or other contacts who might have leads.

Subject matter

Reporting out climate change stories created difficulties with numerous sources. Everyone from farmers in the Midwest to Republican local officials to active military personnel seemed hesitant to engage with reporters on these topics. Overcoming that hesitance to fully report the individual pieces was a major effort throughout the project.

But talking to people who are climate change deniers is a necessity. Reporter Matt Hontz-Hetling wrote seven pieces for the project, including one on Oklahoma farmers struggling to save their herds from heat stress on a 99-degree day in February. During his reporting, he ran

Collier County Commissioner Penny Taylor poses for a portrait on the beach in Naples, Florida. Taylor, a Republican, believes climate change is real and that steps need to be taken to address it.

EDMUND D. FOUNTAIN

Patty Cox and Kevin Hayes are the executive editors of The Weather Channel Digital.

up against sources still unconvinced of climate change. As Matt put it:

They're wrong, and it can be tricky to acknowledge their misinformed point of view without casting doubt on the consensus of the experts. But they're also human and omitting them from your story altogether is simply dishonest.

I presented skeptical beef farmers in Oklahoma as I saw them — nice people living in a deep-red state in which political and community leaders have politicized and distorted the science. I also noted that, because they're old and focused on day-to-day weather conditions, their short-term response to hotter days is likely to serve them just fine, despite their disbelief.

One surprise of devoting this much time and attention to climate change: The issue has such a broad effect that arranging a diverse slate of 50 stories happened pretty organically. Story selection was so easy, in fact, that we're pretty sure we could do another 50 without repeating. But we're not going to. ♦

10 TIPS FOR INVESTIGATING DAM SAFETY

By **Ralph K.M. Haurwitz**, Austin American-Statesman

Dams provide flood control, drinking water, fishing opportunities and other benefits, but they can threaten homes, businesses and roads with a catastrophic release of water if they fail.

An investigation published in November by the Austin American-Statesman found that several hundred dams upstream of populated areas in Texas violate state law because they could be breached by severe floods. The law requires such dams to be capable of holding up against a worst-case flood or, in some cases, a flood half or three-fourths as severe, depending on the size of the dam and the number of people expected to lose their lives if it collapsed.

Here are 10 tips for investigating dams in any community:

1. Scope out the big picture. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintains the National Inventory of Dams, and its interactive website (nid.usace.army.mil) has information on more than 90,000 dams, including city, county, creek or river, purpose and even the name of the U.S. House member in whose district a dam is located. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (fema.gov/dam-safety) and the Association of Dam Safety Officials (damsafety.org) are also good sources, as are the websites of state agencies that regulate dam safety.

2. Scout the territory. You can't miss the Hoover Dam, but the vast majority of dams are much smaller earthen structures, many of which blend into the landscape. You can locate some dams by using online programs such as Google Maps to look for bodies of water. For example, zooming in on a wide stretch of Brushy Creek at the eastern edge of Cedar Park, Texas, reveals the label "Soil Conservation Service Site 7 Reservoir," a telltale clue.

3. Expect obstacles. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, some federal and state agencies have sharply restricted the ability of news organizations and the public to obtain certain information on specific dams, citing security concerns. The restricted information includes whether dams are classified as high-hazard-potential — meaning their failure would threaten human life — and whether such dams could withstand half, most, or all of a worst-case flood as generally required. You can often obtain a considerable amount of aggregate information from regulators, although in some cases it might require filing an open records request.

4. Seek out local officials. Cities, water districts and other local government units that own dams are sometimes willing to share details state and federal regulators won't divulge, in part because disclosure can build public awareness and support for improvements. In Texas, the Upper and Lower Brushy Creek Water Control and Improvement Districts helped us by granting interviews, conducting tours and sharing some site-specific information, such as engineering reports on dams that fall short of meeting safety standards and dams that have been upgraded. The city of Austin also provided site-specific information, including a list broken down by dams that have been modernized to meet state standards, those in need of preliminary engineering for upgrades and ones that have yet to be evaluated. Because the list included addresses, we were able to produce a map.

5. Bone up on the rules. Laws and regulations can be eye-opening. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, in a departure from national norms, applies stricter safety standards to dams whose failure would be expected to cost seven or more lives than it does to dams whose collapse could cost up to six lives. A little-known Texas law exempts more than 3,000 dams from inspections and other safety requirements because of their relatively small size and rural location — including more than 200 whose collapse could cause fatalities.

6. Craft questions with precision.

The Texas environmental commission declined to make anyone available for an interview, but took written questions. I sent an extensive list and the agency responded to each question and, later, my follow-up queries. The commission's answers included a wealth of aggregate data. For example, it said 80 percent of dams whose failure would put people at risk – not counting the exempted ones – had been inspected in the last five years, and 77 percent of dams under the agency's oversight have submitted required emergency plans. The commission declined on security grounds to identify specific dams at issue, and a previous ruling by the state attorney general backs that stance.

7. Look into disaster preparedness.

The owners of dams whose failure would put lives at risk are generally required to have emergency action plans, but more than 4,800 such dams nationwide lack those plans, according to the Army Corps. Enforcement is spotty. Some dam owners will share emergency plans, but they are generally exempt from open records requests. Some plans include maps of the inundation zone, the area that would be flooded if a dam collapsed. Some local officials will let you look at these plans but not copy them.

8. Interview those in harm's way.

Residents, business owners and neighborhood association leaders in areas downstream from substandard dams add a human dimension to a story that might otherwise be heavy on data and policy. Some people we talked to were living near a dam and weren't aware of its existence, much less that they could be in harm's way if severe flooding breached it.

9. Work closely with a photographer and editor.

It helps to have another set of eyes and ears to gather impressions and, of course, to document the story visually, which the *American-Statesman's* Ricardo Brazziell did with skill. I discussed reporting strategy with investigative editor Robert Eckhart, and he made sure I had enough time to do the necessary digging. The project took about two months, although I wrote several articles on other topics during that period as well.

10. Follow up.

Many elected officials don't know there are substandard dams in their jurisdictions. The mayor of Austin, the city's state senator and three chairmen of legislative committees pledged to look into the need for dam repairs and stricter regulation. Also worthwhile: circling back to regulators and dam owners to see if your report has effected change. I wrote about dam safety in Texas 20 years ago, finding an alarming state of neglect with nearly two-thirds of dams above populated areas uninspected for at least five years. The state subsequently increased the size and budget of its regulatory staff.

Ralph K.M. Haurwitz has covered higher education for the Austin American-Statesman since 2004. He was previously a projects reporter and, before that, covered the environmental beat.



THE 2017 IRE AWARDS

Journalists who uncovered wrongdoing that bolstered the #MeToo movement, investigated the murder of a colleague, faced a lawsuit for trying to get public records and brought down a corrupt 100-year-old agency are among the winners of the 2017 Investigative Reporters & Editors Awards.

Across the board, this year's winners made significant impacts. They forced testing of sexual assault evidence kits, made neurosurgery safer for patients and exposed the failure of the British government to investigate the murders of Russians on its soil.

"This year's entries were among the finest examples of investigative reporting I've seen since I began my tenure on the awards committee," said Jill Riepenhoff, chair of IRE's Contest Committee. "From first-year students to seasoned pros, these journalists showed the importance of investigative reporting to hold the powerful accountable. They shattered the fake news myth."

This year's winners were selected from more than 450 entries. Two projects were singled out for IRE Medals, the highest honor the organization bestows. The awards, given since 1979, recognize the most outstanding watchdog journalism of the year. The contest covers 17 categories across media platforms and a range of market sizes.

Explore the winning entries and finalists online: bit.ly/ireawards17.



IRE MEDALS

The highest honor IRE can bestow for investigative reporting is the IRE Medal. This year, there are two medal winners. They are:

"Harassed"

The New York Times,
The New York Times staff

Judges' comments: The New York Times' reporting exposed a massive story hiding in plain sight and drove a worldwide movement to fight harassment, discrimination and abuse against women. This isn't just a tale of the famous, rich and powerful — it is about women in all walks of life. You can draw a direct line from the journalism to a cultural moment still sparking scrutiny and action on issues that women have been forced to quietly tolerate and deal with in their professional and personal lives.

"Killing Pavel"

Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Slidstvo.Info, Anna Babinets, Elena Loginova, Vlad Lavrov, Dmytro Gnap, Matt Sarnecki, Ilya Magazanin, Sergiu Brega, Timmi Allen (Bellingcat)

Judges' comments: "Killing Pavel" is a riveting story documenting the murder investigation conducted by OCCRP and Slidstvo.Info to uncover who may have been responsible for the death of a colleague. Journalists showed incredible tenacity and courage by canvassing the scene of the crime, tracking down key witnesses and digitally analyzing surveillance footage to uncover clues that were previously overlooked by police. Nothing could be more in the spirit of IRE.



SPECIAL AWARDS

IRE Medals are also awarded to winners of two special award categories:

TOM RENNER AWARD



Above: Richard Holmes, Jane Bradley, Heidi Blake, Tom Warren, Alex Campbell
Right: Jason Leopold



“From Russia With Blood”

BuzzFeed News, Heidi Blake, Jason Leopold, Tom Warren, Richard Holmes, Jane Bradley, Alex Campbell

Judges’ comments: The Tom Renner Award goes to BuzzFeed News for its deep dive into a series of suspicious suicides in Great Britain and Washington, D.C., involving two Russian turncoats and three English citizens, that caused the government to open a full investigation. This story has become even more relevant because of the recent nerve gas poisoning of a spy and his daughter. This investigation turned documents into data and created powerful visualizations, especially a reconstruction of the cellphone last held by the murdered central figure. It’s a deeply sourced espionage thriller.

Finalists

- “Libya Slave Auction,” CNN
- “The Malta Files,” The Black Sea (European Investigative Collaborations Network)
- “Code of Silence,” The Indianapolis Star

FOI AWARD



John Braese



Les Zaitz



Pat Caldwell

“Deadly Decisions”

Malheur Enterprise, Les Zaitz, John Braese, Pat Caldwell

Judges’ comments: This is a classic David-meets-Goliath triumph. The small staff at this weekly newspaper in Oregon won a public records battle with the state agency that sued the newspaper to block release of documents. The newspaper launched a GoFundMe drive to raise money for a lawyer to defend the journalist. In the end, the documents were released after the governor stepped in. The paper’s tenacity led to a public affirmation of the state’s commitment to openness. This work is proof that you don’t need a large staff and deep resources to move the needle on open records.

Finalists

- “Political Staffing and Ethics in the Trump Administration,” ProPublica
- “Secret Kansas,” The Kansas City Star
- “Kept in the Dark,” The Oregonian/OregonLive



2017 AWARD WINNERS AND FINALISTS BY CATEGORY



PRINT/ONLINE – DIVISION I

“Harassed,” *The New York Times*,
The New York Times staff

See judges’ comments under “IRE Medal Winners”

Finalists

- “Trump-Russia Investigation,” *The Washington Post*
- “Mexico’s Housing Debacle: A Failed Vision,” *Los Angeles Times*
- “The Secret Life of a USC Dean,” *Los Angeles Times*
- “Lost Mothers,” *ProPublica* and *NPR*

PRINT/ONLINE — DIVISION III

“Fostering Failure,”
San Francisco Chronicle, *Karen de Sá*,
Cynthia Dizikes, *Joaquin Palomino*,
Leah Millis

Judges’ comments: Few in society need more love and understanding than abused and neglected children. But this heartbreaking story revealed that California shelter workers instead relied on the police to carry out routine discipline. Reading about children as young as 8 being jailed and prosecuted for throwing juice boxes or hot dog buns is both rage-inducing and depressing. It is no surprise that this story led to resignations, investigations and immediate improvements to government programs.

Finalists

- “Fight Club: Dark Secrets of Florida Juvenile Justice,” *Miami Herald*
- “Break the Silence,” *The New Zealand Herald*



Cynthia Dizikes



Joaquin Palomino



Karen de Sá



Leah Millis

PRINT/ONLINE DIVISION II

“Quantity of Care,” *The Seattle Times*,
Mike Baker and Justin Mayo

Judges’ comments: In an investigation that relied on more than 200 interviews and 10,000 records from four states, *The Seattle Times* exposed how one of the city’s most well-respected hospitals prioritized profits over patients. It was mixture of incredible personal narratives and hard-hitting investigative work that held powerful, highly esteemed people to heel, including the hospital’s CEO and a top surgeon, who both resigned. What’s more, their work has had an impact not only in their local community, but throughout the health industry.



Mike Baker



Justin Mayo

Finalists

- “Left to Suffer,” *Star Tribune*
- “Ed Murray Sex-Abuse Allegations,” *The Seattle Times*
- “Toxic City, Tainted Soil,” *Philadelphia Media Network*
- “Separate and Unequal,” *Newsday*

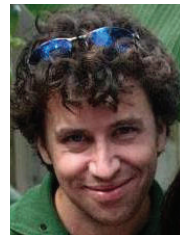
PRINT/ONLINE — DIVISION IV

“Fake Subpoenas,” *The Lens*,
Charles Maldonado, *Steve Myers*

Judges’ comments: In a category packed with outstanding entries, *The Lens*’ series on fake subpoenas stood out. It worked relentlessly to show how prosecutors used illegal subpoenas to coerce reluctant crime victims. To find people who received these fakes, reporters posted flyers on the streets and issued public calls. The series exposed decades of illegal practice and led to its end. The American Civil Liberties Union relied upon the reporting in filing a civil rights lawsuit charging that prosecutors had engaged in coercion and civil rights violations.



Charles Maldonado



Steve Myers

Finalists

- “Imperial Power Players,” *The Desert Sun*
- “Coming Clean,” *Reading Eagle Co.*
- “Renter Hell,” *Asbury Park Press*
- “Oklahoma Veterans Center Deaths,” *Tulsa World*



BROADCAST/VIDEO — DIVISION I



Anna Babinets



Dmytro Gnap



Elena Loginova



Matt Sarnecki



Vlad Lavrov

“Killing Pavel,”

Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Slidstvo.Info, Anna Babinets, Elena Loginova, Vlad Lavrov, Dmytro Gnap, Matt Sarnecki, Ilya Magazanin, Sergiu Brega, Timmi Allen (Bellingcat)

See judges' comments under "IRE Medal Winners"

Finalists

"The Remington 700," 60 Minutes

"Poverty, Politics and Profit," FRONTLINE and NPR

BROADCAST/VIDEO — DIVISION II (TIE)



Scott Friedman



Eva Parks



Jack Douglas



Jose Sanchez



Frank Heinz

“Big Buses, Bigger Problems: Taxpayers Taken for a Ride,”

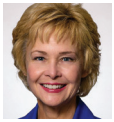
KXAS/NBC5 Dallas-Fort Worth, Scott Friedman, Eva Parks, Jack Douglas, Jose Sanchez, Frank Heinz, Mark Ginther



Mark Ginther

Judges' comments: For years, reporters had chased this complicated story to prove corruption. In 2017, they nailed it, forcing the shutdown of a 100-year-old government agency that had for years bamboozled Dallas County taxpayers. The downfall began with a gamble on a program to sell cameras to catch drivers failing to stop for school buses and ended with a web of entanglements between the bus superintendent and the camera company's CEO. The story stretched from Dallas to a luxury apartment in New Orleans' French Quarter. This was classic corruption busted wide open.

BROADCAST/VIDEO — DIVISION III



Nancy Amons



Jeremy Finley



Demetria Kalodimos



Jim Garbee



Jason Finley

“Influence, Infidelity and Men in Power,”

WSMV-Nashville, Nancy Amons, Jeremy Finley, Demetria Kalodimos, Jim Garbee, Jason Finley

Judges' comments: This story had it all: corruption, dead people and more. It was a powerful unearthing of a judge's secret that never would have been revealed if not for the team, which kept digging even when faced with personal retribution. Producing more than 60 stories, mostly within two months, the result was staggering: the arrest and resignation of a sitting Nashville judge. The team tirelessly peeled back every shameful layer of corruption, and its work was so important that it was cited in the federal indictment. It is a testament to this team's dedication. Bravo!

Finalists

"3,000 Toxic Homes," WTHR-Indianapolis

"Toxic School Water," WTVF-Nashville

“The Drug Whisperer,”

WXIA-Atlanta, Brendan Keefe



Brendan Keefe

Judges' comments: Through dogged reporting and compelling storytelling, this investigation exposed a shocking practice by a suburban police department in the Atlanta area. An officer was "trained" to detect marijuana usage solely by giving drivers an eyeball test. Video showed the officer accusing drivers, often women, of drug abuse and arresting them. After months of legal troubles, each driver in the televised arrests was cleared of any drug use through chemical testing. The stories provoked rage at seeing people arrested and humiliated for no reason. Journalism of the highest quality.

Finalist

"Sick and Forgotten at Hanford," KING5 Seattle



BROADCAST/VIDEO — DIVISION IV

“State of Unrest,” *WVUE-New Orleans, Lee Zurik, Jon Turnipseed, Tom Wright, Mike Schaefer, Greg Phillips*

Judges’ comments: In a textbook example of watching the watchers, reporters revealed payroll fraud, falsified documents, fixed tickets and padded expenses by the Louisiana State Police in a yearlong investigation. Resignations, suspensions and criminal investigations quickly followed. In fact, the entire agency was shut down. This was a great example of how journalists can bring video, public records and key interviews together to produce a bulletproof accountability story.

Finalist “The BRAVE Fallout,” WAFB-Baton Rouge



Lee Zurik



Jon Turnipseed



Tom Wright



Mike Schaefer



Greg Phillips



Howard Berkes



Michael Grabell



Meg Anderson



R.G. Dunlop



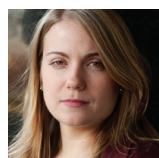
Jacob Ryan



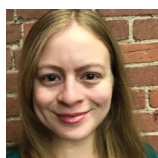
Laura Ellis



Brendan McCarthy



Nicole Beemsterboer



Sarah Betancourt



Graham Bishai



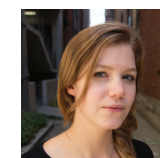
Erica Peterson



Stephen George



Sean Cannon



Alexandra Kanik

RADIO/AUDIO – LARGE

“They Got Hurt at Work — Then They Got Deported,” *NPR and ProPublica, Howard Berkes (NPR), Michael Grabell (ProPublica), Meg Anderson (NPR), Nicole Beemsterboer (NPR), Sarah Betancourt (ProPublica), Graham Bishai (NPR)*

Judges’ comments: This series exposed the outrageous hypocrisy of Florida employers who are happy using labor from undocumented workers – until those same people try to claim workers’ compensation benefits they’re entitled to legally. The reporters revealed how insurance companies targeted these injured workers for denial of benefits, fraud prosecutions and even deportations. They dove into 14 years’ worth of public records that no one was paying attention to and revealed an obscure loophole in a law that came as a surprise even to legislators.

Finalists

- “How One Sentence Helped Set Off The Opioid Crisis,” The Uncertain Hour, Marketplace
- “All Work. No Pay.” Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting
- “Chicago Public Schools Secretly Overhauled Special Education at Students’ Expense,” WBEZ Public Radio

RADIO/AUDIO – SMALL

“The Pope’s Long Con,” *The Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting, R.G. Dunlop, Jacob Ryan, Laura Ellis, Brendan McCarthy, Erica Peterson, Stephen George, Sean Cannon, Alexandra Kanik*

Judges’ comments: This was a powerful and ultimately heartbreaking entry. The reporting team dug deep into the secret history of State Rep. Danny Ray Johnson, a pastor who referred to himself as the pope of his flock. They unearthed evidence of a long track record of fraud and self-enrichment, including perjury and an insurance scam, and the sexual assault of a 17-year-old girl. It had immediate impact, with lawmakers calling for Johnson’s resignation within hours of the story’s publication. Tragically, Johnson took his life days later. Faced with an emotionally wrenching event, KyCIR handled itself with compassion and sensitivity.

Finalists

- “Chemawa Indian School Investigation,” Oregon Public Broadcasting
- “A Scar on the System,” WNIN and Side Effects Public Media
- “Louisville Police Don’t Enforce Immigration - But Help The Feds Do It,” Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting



University
of Regina

STUDENT – LARGE

“Crude Power: An Investigation Into Oil, Money and Influence in Saskatchewan,”

University of Regina School of Journalism, Jennifer Ackerman, Madina Azizi, Janelle Blakley, Cory Coleman, Josh Diaz, Brenna Engel, Céline Grimard, Jared Gottselig, Rebecca Marroquin, Katie Doke Sawatzky, Michaela Solomon, Kyrsten Stringer, Caitlin Taylor, Michael Wrobel, Trevor Grant, Patricia Elliott

Judges’ comments: This beautifully produced documentary examined the connections between oil, money and influence in the oil-rich province of Saskatchewan. Using documents obtained from nearly two dozen public records requests and links to reports, which officials later removed, and conducting more than 150 interviews, these tenacious first-year journalism students found a cozy relationship between the government and oil industry at the expense of taxpayers. It had a huge impact: More whistleblowers came forward, and there’s a call for review of safety lapses.

Finalists

“Pedestrian Casualties,” Capital News Service
“Troubled Water: An Investigation of Drinking Water in America,” News21
“HookedRX: From Prescription to Addiction,” Cronkite News



Anna
Brett



Katherine
Reed

STUDENT – SMALL

“Sexual Assault Evidence Backlog,”

The Columbia Missourian, Anna Brett and Katherine Reed

Judges’ comments: Investigating a failure of law enforcement and hospitals to test sexual assault DNA evidence kits is tough subject matter for even a seasoned reporter. This investigation unearthed numbers that nobody knew or wanted to know. It had immediate impact, forcing the state to do its own audit of the backlog. The story also starkly illustrated its importance with the personal story of a woman whose sexual assault evidence kit was eventually tested, leading to an arrest.

Finalist

“\$8 Million of Huntsman School Differential Tuition Being Spent Without Input From Students Who Pay It,” The Utah Statesman



Paula
Lavigne



Mark
Schlabach

BOOK

“Violated: Exposing Rape at Baylor University Amid College Football’s Sexual Assault Crisis,”

Paula Lavigne and Mark Schlabach

Judges’ comments: The judges found every chapter of “Violated” revelatory with its deep dive into university campus sexual assault, its compelling writing and its link to the authors’ beat reporting for ESPN. Many universities wrestle with assaults of women by high-profile athletes, but Lavigne and Schlabach documented that Baylor University deserved focused attention due to a number of factors: the hypocrisy about male-female relationships at a conservative Baptist university, the prominence of the university president, the cover-ups and the long-term existence of the criminal behavior. Not at all incidentally, the authors captured the destroyed lives of the victimized women.

Finalist

“The Chickenshit Club: Why the Justice Department Fails to Prosecute Executives,” Jesse Eisinger



Gary Marx (left) and David Jackson (right)



Stacey
Wescott



Duaa
Eldeib

INVESTIGATIONS TRIGGERED BY BREAKING NEWS

“Semaj Crosby,”

Chicago Tribune, David Jackson, Gary Marx, Duaa Eldeib, Alicia Fabbre, Stacey Wescott

Judges’ comments: In the days and weeks following the death of a Chicago toddler, reporters broke a series of stories that exposed dysfunction at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, including inexcusable government failures in the management of Crosby’s case. The stories were gut-wrenching and remarkably well-told and led to state investigations of the agency. The reporters told the larger truth about a problem that, for years, was hiding in plain sight.

Finalists

“Flooding at Toxic Waste Sites,” The Associated Press
“Wine Country Fires,” San Francisco Chronicle



**GANNETT AWARD FOR INNOVATION IN
WATCHDOG JOURNALISM**

**“Paradise Papers: Secrets of the
Global Elite,”**

*The International Consortium of
Investigative Journalists, Süddeutsche
Zeitung, The New York Times, The Guardian
and more than 90 media partners*

Judges’ comments: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists’ “Paradise Papers” exhibited extraordinary innovation in exposing the secret tax machinations of some of the world’s most powerful people and corporations. The judges selected ICIJ for its technological prowess in making a vast cache of records usable for reporters spread across the world, its ethos of “radical collaboration” and the broad impact of the resulting stories, which prompted investigations and changes in tax policy in several countries. The consortium was lauded for breaking the boundaries of investigative journalism with the Panama Papers, but this project went beyond even that. ICIJ used reverse-engineering techniques to reconstruct corporate databases, used algorithms to draw out people and organizations of interest, and further developed its platform to allow reporters to search within and across datasets and visualize the connections among people and business entities. To top it off, ICIJ has made its software code and large stores of data available to the public.

THANK YOU, JUDGES!

Serving on the Contest Committee represents a significant sacrifice on the part of the individual contest judge — and often an entire newsroom — that may have done outstanding investigative work. For example, some work from The Columbus Dispatch, Raycom Media, NerdWallet, The New York Times, ProPublica, NBC Bay Area, St. Louis Public Radio and The Washington Post was ineligible for entry in this year’s contest.

This year’s contest judges:



**Jill
Riepenhoff,
Raycom
Media –
Chair**



**Matt Apuzzo,
The New
York Times**



**Saleem
Khan,
INVSTG8.
NET**



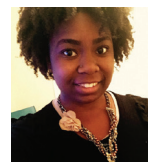
**T. Christian
Miller,
ProPublica**



**Kevin Nious,
NBC Bay
Area**



**Jim Polk,
formerly of
CNN**



**Kameel
Stanley, St.
Louis Public
Radio**



**Cheryl W.
Thompson,
The George
Washington
University
and The
Washington
Post**

Age of denial

FOIA fights increasing in the Trumpezoic Era

After more than a year of deliberation, the jury has reached a verdict: “More secrecy.”

All signs point toward an even more broken Freedom of Information Act system since President Donald Trump took office. Numbers tell the story.

In its annual FOIA report released in March, the Department of Justice stated that federal agencies are processing more requests than ever and reducing backlogs (bit.ly/DOJ-FOIA). The report failed to mention, however, that the preferred method of reducing backlogs is to simply say records don’t exist. Here is what some top FOIA trackers have noted:

- **More delays.** Michael Morisy, co-founder of MuckRock, analyzed thousands of requests submitted through his website and found that federal FOIA request completion times increased from 162 days to 169 days under the Trump administration (bit.ly/MorisyFOIA).

- **More diddly-squat.** Of the 823,222 FOIA requests submitted in the first eight months of 2017, about 78 percent resulted in nothing, an all-time high, according to Associated Press Washington, D.C., investigations editor Ted Bridis. Agencies were more likely to use the excuse that they could not find the records, which happened 18 percent more than in the previous year. And when records were provided, two-thirds included redactions.

- **More suing.** It’s no surprise, then, that FOIA lawsuits surged 26 percent, from 515 in fiscal year 2016 to 651 in fiscal year 2017, according to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse at Syracuse University (bit.ly/FOIA-lawsuit).

What’s going on?

Jason Leopold, a senior investigative reporter for BuzzFeed News, has been submitting FOIA requests for a decade, including more than 600 requests last year. He said he’s seen increased secrecy under the Trump administration, particularly among law enforcement agencies. The FBI, he said, has been using the Glomar response — also known as the “neither confirm nor deny” —



By **David Cuillier**,
*University of
Arizona School of
Journalism*

David Cuillier is director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism in Tucson, Arizona, and co-author, with Charles Davis, of “The Art of Access: Strategies for Acquiring Public Records.”

more frequently, not even acknowledging that a record may or may not exist. Leopold also is seeing politically sensitive requests vetted more often by political appointees.

“You saw that in the Obama administration, as well, but I am seeing it happening more and more under this administration,” he said.

Leopold said FOIA offices are thinly staffed and some agencies are contracting out with inexperienced firms. Leopold said he is not aware of FOIA officers being ordered to withhold records, “but they are more aggressive in denying, and that has to come from someplace.”

Nate Jones, director of the Freedom of Information Act Project for the National Security Archive, said he’s seen variation among agencies. A lack of oversight by the White House has actually enabled some departments to release more information. The Department of State, for example, provided him documents faster and with fewer redactions in the past year.

“Agency by agency, however, there are some troubling trends of more denials, redactions and slower times,” he said in an email.

Ultimately, he noted, FOIA implementation is unlikely to improve under the controlling hand of the Department of Justice’s Office of Information Policy, which has had the same leadership since the George W. Bush administration.

Appeal to the public

More troubling, attacks on public records access have increased at the state and local levels since Trump came into office. While statistics aren’t tracked across the states, some severe and blatant attacks this year included an attempt by the Washington state legislature to exempt itself from its state public records law and a proposal in Kentucky to exempt government electronic communications from disclosure.

These efforts are only thwarted through public outcry and rallying of the troops. That includes help from news organizations. It’s not inside baseball — this affects people’s ability to find out what’s going on, and journalists have an obligation to defend that right.

At a minimum, journalists should appeal any records denial they receive. Research from Bridis and others indicate that one-third of the time a simple appeal letter will kick information loose. Still, only 4 percent of those denied actually send an appeal.

Ultimately, the best strategy for pushing back against increased secrecy is to keep digging for records — every day — to keep government honest and the public informed. ♦

A risky job in a dangerous region

A call to support Arab investigative journalists



By

Rana Sabbagh,
*Arab Reporters
for Investigative
Journalism*

No one ever said journalism was an easy profession. This is especially true in the Arab world, where oppressive governments rule supreme and media bosses sacrifice fair and honest reporting just to survive.

Attacks come from everywhere: inefficient leaders, corrupt politicians, entrenched economic elites, militias, even the average reader who increasingly views independent reporters as the enemy.

The job gets even more complicated for accountability journalists seeking to expose miscarriages of justice, rampant corruption and inept public services funded by taxpayers who favor transparency.

Using the pretexts of the war on terror, safeguarding citizens from the political unrest and combating fake news, Arab governments are clamping down on whatever is left of independent and free media.

The few brave journalists who dare to expose the truth risk job security and possibly their lives. Battalions of “electronic fighters” are working for governments, security services, businessmen and politicians to discredit journalists, wage online attacks and spread misinformation.

In plain words: We are working in one of the riskiest jobs in one of the worst regions for journalists. Even safe topics like health, education and consumer issues are becoming problematic.

Does that mean that journalists should just give up? Certainly not. But we also should not underestimate the obstacles put up by officials. Arab investigative reporters need to be extra careful, calculating risks, boosting professional skills and encrypting communications to protect themselves and their sources.

Here are some examples of what we’re up against:

- An award-winning Egyptian journalist working with support from the Amman-based Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) — an organization I lead — was dismissed by his newspaper for exposing allegations of torture at the Central Security Forces.

- In Beirut, the owners of a TV station turned against their ARIJ-trained reporter who exposed their relatives in the Panama Papers.

- ARIJ editors based in Amman are hearing more and more from fearful reporters reluctant or unwilling to do final confrontation interviews, which are required by ARIJ to ensure fairness. Reporters worry about physical harm and political harassment. ARIJ editors are increasingly handling accountability interviews from Amman via email to assist local reporters.

- In Yemen, there is simply no free media anymore. Members of ARIJ know: You either work for media supporting the government or the Houthi rebel movement. In Egypt, the situation is not better. In the past four years, the country has become the world’s largest jailer of journalists.

- In Jordan, private and state-run newspapers run virtually the same front-page stories and photos thanks to efficient “white glove” censorship. The top executive of a new public broadcast station — allegedly promoting a more socially liberal editorial agenda — is appointed by official decree. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and elsewhere, laws intended to stop cybercriminals and terrorists are being turned against journalists.

So, what keeps the 1,800 journalists, media professors and students trained and supported by ARIJ going?

Members of ARIJ find solidarity and comfort in the coaching, training, funding and pre- and post-publication legal support provided by the network. ARIJ’s annual conference provides a unique opportunity to swap ideas, acquire tools to deploy against censorship and disinformation, and learn about digital and physical security.

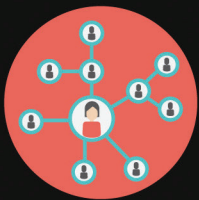
A lot is expected from Arab journalists. They need — and deserve — support from international media, donors and like-minded networks like IRE. ♦

Rana Sabbagh has been the executive director of Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism since 2005.

IRE

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