

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

### Abstract

This case is about the challenges of investigative reporting. It demonstrates how reporters must “peel the onion” to get at a complex story which starts small but grows steadily in importance and impact. The South Florida *Sun-Sentinel* began in the fall of 2004 to investigate the consequences of a wave of hurricanes on their region. Eventually, the reporting team discovered widespread fraud by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid recipients, as well as instances of complicit FEMA inspectors, many of whom had criminal backgrounds. As the story grew to national scope, editors had to consider how to best deploy the newspaper’s resources to serve South Florida readers.

In class discussion, students should have an opportunity to discuss the mechanics as well as the strategies of investigative reporting. They will gain insight into the usefulness of computer-assisted reporting; the need to build skills in reading maps, graphs and tables; and the benefits of simply going door-to-door to get necessary information. They will also have an opportunity to experience editorial decisionmaking at high levels, as they are asked to put themselves in the shoes of the *Sun-Sentinel*’s editors as they decide which reporting decision is best for the paper as a whole.

The case can be used in a course about investigative journalism; about editorial management; or about covering the federal government.

### Credits

*This case was written by Kathleen Gilsinan for the Knight Case Studies Initiative, Graduate School of Journalism, Columbia University. The faculty sponsor was Professor Sheila Coronel. The Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CCNMTL) produced the multimedia, online product. James R. Garfield was the project coordinator, and Zarina Mustapha was the website designer. Funding was provided by the Knight Foundation. (0908)*

Copyright © 2008 The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. No part of this publication may be reproduced, revised, translated, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the Case Studies Initiative.

### For further information, please contact:

Kirsten Lundberg, Director, KCSI

Tel: 212-854-8398

Fax: 212-854-7837

Email: [Kirsten.Lundberg@jrn.columbia.edu](mailto:Kirsten.Lundberg@jrn.columbia.edu)

Website: [http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/case\\_initiative](http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/case_initiative)

**Send written inquiries to:**

Knight Case Studies Initiative

2950 Broadway, MC 3812

New York, NY 10027

---

[Introduction »](#)

---