Hurricane Florence: Importance of Information

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In times of disaster, many people’s lives are impacted in more ways than one can image. The local news stations are the first places that people turn to for information regarding their areas and the impacts they will endure. Over the past two weeks I worked on the Social Media team for WPDE ABC15 during the days leading up to the landfall of Hurricane Florence, as well as organizing relief efforts for flood evacuees, first responders, and troops making rescues. Everyone is always more concerned about what to prepare for before and what is happening during hurricanes, than the impacts these storms leave behind.

Before the storm there are many things in which people need to prepare for. Unlike past hurricanes that have affected the area, people did not seem that concerned with Hurricane Florence. When the National Weather Service announced that Florence was strengthening and becoming a more intense storm than they had seen in a very long time, it was also the first true weekend of college football. In the south college football is something that we are raised on and never miss a Saturday. This Saturday however was different for those of us that work in emergency management centers, government offices, and the media. Before leaving work on Friday we were given our hurricane manuals and orders from our chef meteorologist to make the necessary preparations for our families, homes, and pets.

This warning was different as in years past when dealing with Hurricane Matthew and the Thousand Year Floods. Over the weekend our team as well as other teams that are necessary to making our community safe, took the orders and prepared. The community around us did not even seem to notice that there was about to be a Category 4 hurricane named Florence breathing down our neck. Looking through social media, you would have thought it was a normal Saturday in the South with people cheering on Clemson and USC. The same thing even occurred that Sunday, because people were more interested in NFL than getting ready. This does not mean that people were not already prepared through.

Living in an area that is prone to hurricanes, especially this time of the year, people stay prepared. It is always something that is in the back of our minds. People in the area always have their essential documents together as well as their plans for evacuations ready in the event that evacuation orders are made by government officials. People never consider the situations that occur after a hurricane, and only become concerned with preparation before the storm and during. Water supplies, non-perishable food items, clothing, and essentials are just a few of the things that people do not consider.

Having been through many hurricanes, personally the after effects seem to always be the most emotional, and testing of humanity. The communities come together to aid one another, but preparations for after the storm are after thoughts. People should have enough water to be able to live a week or even two depending on when the water sources will not be contaminated, as well as having food to be able to cook with for the same amount of time. Houses and businesses also have to prepare for flooding after a hurricane as well as looting. There are many things to consider when going through something like this.

The Grand Strand is a beach town and was expected to get hit the hardest along with the North Carolina coast. However, the Grand Strand was spared, but the surrounding areas were not, and some of those areas were not as prepared as the Grand Strand was. Horry and Georgetown Counties were ordered to evacuate if people lived within the three evacuation zones which are closer to the ocean. During a hurricane the storm surge has the potential to be extreme and cause massive flooding on its own and can reach parts of the areas that would be considered to be inland depending on the strength of the hurricane. An evacuation order for all three zones had not been given in a very long time. On Monday, Governor Henry McMaster gave the evacuation orders for all three evacuation zones, and people finally started to take Hurricane Florence more seriously. There were people frantically hurrying about gathering last minute supplies and leaving the beach. This made for a not so normal day at WPDE ABC15 as more preparations were made to ensure our staff was ready to handle what Hurricane Florence had to throw at us.

The entire WPDE team worked 12-hour shifts starting on Tuesday that are still continuing today to ensure that everyone was prepared, knew routes to leave the beach, and other vital pieces of information that came into the newsroom. Thursday at 8pm we went into wall to wall coverage not even stopping for a commercial break. This is essential to make sure that people are staying aware of what is happening as well as informing those that did not heed the evacuation orders.

Working on the Social Media team in a newsroom does not just limit you to social media. There are web stories that have to be written when information comes in from government officials, monitoring of posts and comments, answering questions through social media platforms, and being an overall support system. I had the opportunity to write many articles to help inform the public in the WPDE ABC15 viewing area of closures, gas price increases, shortages, shelters, closures, advisories, as well as other pertinent information. Some of the articles listed later are written by WPDE, which means several members of the team contributed to these stories, as well as me.

During Hurricane Florence two of our sister stations in North Carolina experienced flooding during their newscasts and had to evacuate the buildings. At that time WPDE ABC15 took over coverage for not only our eight counties but also the areas that now could no longer receive information.

During our wall to wall news coverage, we also streamed the 48-hour live broadcast on Twitter, Facebook, and wpde.com to ensure that everyone had the opportunity to get the vital information and forecasts that were coming in to the newsroom. When people lose power, they turn to their phones and social media to gain the information that they need. When vital information needed to get to the masses quickly the WPDE Social Team would write articles and send push notifications out through the WPDE ABC15 News App.

Now just two weeks after the eye of Hurricane Florence passed over Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, major flooding is on the horizon. The rainfall from Hurricane Florence totals 11.1 trillion gallons of water that fell over both North and South Carolina. To put this in perspective, that is enough water for everyone on the planet to take 69 showers or 218,114 bottles of water for every single American and there are over 327 million people in the United States. Due to the gargantuan amount of rain, all of the rivers are now flooding and impacting more people, homes, and businesses. All of the rivers flow southward and empty into the ocean through a little town called Georgetown. The rivers throughout the area are seeing above record flooding. Due to more devastation to come the WPDE team is still in full force and going strong.

**Stakeholders:**

There are many stakeholders involved in something of this magnitude. Emergency management and government officials turn to our chef meteorologist for the best predictions and the ability to not inflate the truth. WPDE ABC15 turns to those same officials regarding information that the citizens need to know and deliver the right information. The citizens are also considered stakeholders because they are tuning in to know what they can expect when they return home. All of the stakeholders involved are similar to that of a lifecycle where everyone is depending on each other. First responders are also included as they are not able to make rescues or assist the community once winds are stronger than 35mph.

After Hurricane Florence the National Guard, first responders, non-profits, local to national government agencies, schools, business owners, students, parents, citizens all are considered stakeholders. When evacuation orders were made, McMaster also signed a state of emergency so that farmers, businesses, and citizens can start the paperwork for federal assistance. This does not mean that the state is currently devastated but helps the speed up the process after the storm due to its already lengthy process.

**Financial Resources:**

There are many financial resources at this moment as people are applying for FEMA assistance for job wages that have been lost, as well as homes and businesses flooded and devastated. Government assistance is also pouring in as far as man hours by troops and the equipment needed to make more rescues and evacuations. Personal donations are being made to the Red Cross as well as the Salvation Army. Food and water donations are also being made by citizens and corporations not affected to help those in the now flooded areas. Because devastation is still occurring, a total financial number is not available. The community is stepping up to help others in any way that is possible. Sources from outside of the Carolinas are also making monetary donations which are helping tremendously. The Second Harvest Food Bank is flying in thousands of pounds of food to the affected areas for distribution centers to get to flood evacuees, first responders, and troops on the ground.

**Personal Relationships:**

Having grown up in the area, I am very fortunate to know many people and have worked with many organizations. I have been able to help orchestrate flood relief efforts for our area by getting the right people in touch with one another and thinking outside the box. Chef Geoff Blount with the International Culinary Institute at Horry Georgetown Technical College helped WPDE by personally cooking for us during Hurricane Florence. When I got off work that Saturday night, I received a phone call from Blount asking me for help. Due to the rising waters schools have been closed going on three weeks, so students are not able to return to campus. Blount stated that he was able to get the man power needed to cook 1000 meals a day for anyone who needed it, but they needed a location in order to take on this project. In less than 24 hours I had reached out to Investigator Marcus Rhodes with the Horry County Police Department and together we were able to get Chef Blount in touch with Major Angela Repass with the Salvation Army. Major Repass is in charge of organizing all of the food distribution to the areas in need. It was suggested that they use their Conway Campus for the base of their operations as it was just outside the flood area and in a safe zone. The next day Chef Blount, with the help of students, faculty, vendors, and staff started prepping meals to be distributed as well as a trailer for people to drop off non-perishable food items, cases of water, cleaning supplies, and personal items that are needed.

WPDE ABC15 was able to get the information to our viewers and next thing that Chef Blount knew more donations were rolling in to help with the efforts. Over the last couple of days, they have been able to distribute over 5000 meals. Military and Salvation Army trucks start lining up around 11am and food is all out of the kitchen by noon and on its way to the people who need it. Chef Blount is also feeding 200 troops currently being housed at the detention center breakfast every day in which he personally delivers.

I have also been grateful to have run into the owners of the Mister Softy ice cream trucks and was able to get them involved as well. They were able to give away free ice cream to the first responders and troops as a little pick me up and thank you for all they are doing. Conway Ford has also reached out to me to ask how they can help and I have directed them to Chef Blount.

During Hurricane Katrina, food was sent from the Carolinas to New Orleans, and now New Orleans and the Second Harvest Food Bank is sending food to the Carolinas. There is a plane that will be arriving at Myrtle Beach International Airport on Sunday, September 23, with 1200 pounds of food. Wings of Service donated their plane and time to help get food to the Grand Strand as well as New Bern, North Carolina. There will be teams of people to help unload the plane when it arrives as well as loading it into the kitchen at Horry Georgetown Technical College. I was able to help get the press releases out from Chef Amy Sins with the Second Harvest Food Bank to all of the news stations, not just ours, as well as to the government officials.

It is in times like these that people come out of the woodwork to help and stakeholders become financial resources, and everything becomes very fluid. Contributions have been pouring in from all over and it has been an overwhelming and emotional time.

**Interest Groups:**

After a hurricane there are many groups that come into the area to “help” but can be considered scams. All of the groups that are already helping and moved into the area prior to Florence hitting are organizations that are truly helping. The so-called businesses move in to the affected areas to provide services, but demand payment upfront and prey on the emotions of the citizens. Citizens who are affected just want to rebuild their lives and get back to a sense of normalcy, and the scammers take advantage of these people. This is an example of the bad interest groups that come into play when dealing with a natural disaster.

There are many interest groups at this moment are helping to ensure that the infrastructure does not crumble, and public goods can still be provided. Some of these interest groups are electric companies locally as well as from states far away, water treatment management to ensure the safety of the water supply, etc. The water supply is in danger at this time. There have been dam breeches in North Carolina, that reached the coal ash and contaminated the water supply. Conway, South Carolina is monitoring the water around the coal ash 24 hours a day to ensure that our water supply remains safe, although this is not a guarantee. Citizens have been asked to limit water usage to only the usage necessary.

There are many organizations, people, and agencies working together preparing food, making sandbags, and doing rescues even though in the long run we may all have different views and opinions. Deep below the surface, everyone is working towards the common goal to keep families and communities together and provide a support system to set the preface to rebuild.

**Information:**

Information is provided as stated before on many different platforms in order to reach the people who need the information. This is done through social media platforms, broadcast television, news apps on phones, and news articles published on WPDE.com. Much of the information that was published helped and continues to help people understand the implications Hurricane Florence had and continues to have on our area. It also helps the citizens to make decisions that could save the lives of their families and friends.

**Articles:**

* <https://wpde.com/news/local/aaa-gasoline-supply-impacted-due-to-hurricane-florence>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/utility-companies-make-preparations-ahead-of-hurricane-florence>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/gas-prices-not-expected-to-rise-due-to-hurricane-florence>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/last-minute-supplies-for-hurricane-florence>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/transportation-to-evacuation-shelters-in-the-pee-dee-and-grand-strand-areas>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/myrtle-beach-businesses-required-to-have-operations-complete-by-5pm-wednesday>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/florence-regional-airport-will-be-closing-on-wednesday>
* <https://wpde.com/weather/hurricane-stories/boil-water-advisory-in-effect-for-certain-areas>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/santee-cooper-begins-restoring-power>
* <https://wpde.com/weather/hurricane-stories/tidelands-health-temporarily-suspends-services-at-waccamaw-community-hospital>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/closings-for-monday-september-17-2018>
* <https://wpde.com/weather/hurricane-maps/hurricane-florence-power-outages>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/closings-for-sunday-september-15-2018>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/closings-and-delays-ahead-of-hurricane-florence>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/shelters-open-across-south-carolina-as-florence-approaches>
* <https://wpde.com/news/local/curfews-in-effect-for-several-counties-ahead-of-hurricane-florence>

**Cyber:**

There are many technological tools available to our team at WPDE ABC15. We are able to get information to everyone through social media networks, broadcast newscasts, push notifications through the news app, Facebook Live videos, web site articles, and more. We are able to gather information through other online resources such as Live Stream Medias, the Associated Press, press releases from officials and organizations, etc. WPDE ABC15 is owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group which currently owns the most television stations in the country. The resources and ability to tap into other stations newscasts if needed is remarkable. We also use microwave signals to get the picture projected to your television set at home, as well as live weather cameras, weather stations, and live data feeds that are read by our meteorologists.

Hurricanes and natural disasters are something that I hope people do not have to deal with but know that it is inevitable. I could not have asked for a better team to be a part of a WPDE ABC15 and the ability to help keep my community well informed, even if that meant breaking into General Hospital for a special statement from the Governor. Going through something like this is always a wakeup call, but will restore your faith in humanity and humble the most egotistical human beings.