Today’s environment reporters find themselves dealing in a maelstrom of accusations and threats by those intent on discounting their reporting, not understanding their reporting, or failing to understand the basics of journalism.

I see two key recent issues that touch on journalism ethics that also touch on a much more important issue facing reporters today – “residual risk.”

First, though, let’s talk about bias. I’m not talking about “fake news” here, a term that I think has absolutely no meaning. As a news reporter, my job is to provide the most accurate information that I can. When I give my opinion on things, I label it opinion, and that’s different from news.

There’s little I can do about those who don’t believe what I’m saying is accurate, other than show them where the information comes from and why I believe it is accurate. And while I have 5,400 Twitter followers, Donald Trump has 50 million. So, I must rely on the public, as dangerous as that may be, to determine the difference between news and fake news.

Back to bias

Yes, I am biased. All journalists are biased. My biases include my insistence that my stories be as accurate as they can be before they are published online or in print, a proposition that’s become increasingly difficult in an era when I’m sometimes posting news online, literally, as it happens. My bias also includes that as a reporter for a local newspaper, I believe I have a responsibility to represent my readers, that I have a duty to ask the hard questions they would want asked when approaching major issues or major politicians.

And I also have to recognize where I might have problematical biases that could push my reporting in improper or inaccurate directions, and when that happens, I have to deal with it. The example I always use is Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Some might have concluded that I had
a built-in bias in coverage of the Army Corps of Engineers in the aftermath of Katrina flooding because my own home was flooded with 15 feet of water by the failure of a floodwall that was improperly designed and built by the Corps and its contractors.

The reality was that 40% of the Times-Picayune's staffers at that time had their homes damaged or destroyed by Katrina flooding. Our staff had no choice other than to put our personal feelings about our own situations in a mental box and keep them there. We recognized it. Our management insisted on it.

I was lucky in that, while my life certainly was in disarray after Katrina – I lived nine different places in the six months after the storm – I also was well aware of the risk beforehand, had pretty much preached about it. In a 2002 series called “Washing Away,” we explained that the area’s levee system did not meet modern standards, a conclusion the Corps agreed with at the time.

It also helped that I had numerous conversations with Corps employees in the immediate aftermath of the storm, many of whom were dealing with the exact same problems I was. Close to half of their staffers also lost their homes or had friends who did. One was senior project manager Kevin Wagner, who was not able to immediately deal with the flooding of his own home, and its filling with oily water from a Murphy Oil storage tank failure, and like me was not able to evacuate with his family to safer locations, because he, too, felt it was his duty to respond to the disaster.

Some on our staff couldn’t deal with putting their blame feelings in a box, though, and either had to resign or be transferred to beats that didn’t deal with covering Katrina’s aftermath.

After Katrina, we were asking hard questions based on our own knowledge about how the storm affected our and our neighbors’ lives, and we attempted – I think successfully – to distinguish between blame and causation.

Journalism should have a purpose

I’ve also found that I have a bias in my belief that just as I must represent the questions of the residents of our area, I also must ask questions on behalf of those who can’t ask – our natural resources. That role has driven me to make sure that I’m relying on fact-based, peer-reviewed science or engineering results when talking about controversial subjects like climate change or chemical risks or flood risks. And it’s also why I keep pushing to find more information about deepwater effects of the 2010 BP oil spill – that out-of-sight, out-of-mind area of the Gulf of Mexico that actually saw the most exposure to BP oil and could see effects lasting for decades or longer, exacerbated by other environmental changes like global warming.

As you can tell, I believe in the idea that journalism should have a purpose. Former Times-Picayune features editor and reporting partner James O’Byrne used the phrase “mission journalism” to describe the aggressive efforts we made in the aftermath of Katrina to represent our readers, a return to the old-style journalism represented by the saying, “Afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.”

Some reporters I know talk about mission journalism in terms of a moral compass having its roots in their belief in Christianity. I prefer to call it mitzvah journalism, from the Hebrew word mitzvah, which is variously defined as a good deed or one of God’s commandments. The root of the Hebrew word comes from another Hebrew word, Tzav-ta, that means companionship or personal attachment and that Jewish scholars interpret as saying that a mitzvah creates a bond between the God who commands and the man who performs. And the completion of such tasks, they say, creates Tikkan Olam, the repairing of the world. And I can’t think of a better mission for journalism in the aftermath of Katrina.
Katrina and its aftermath marked a high-water point for the *Times-Picayune*, both in terms of the intensity of its coverage, the size of its staff, and its influence on the digitalization of the nation’s print news organizations. Between Sunday, the day before Katrina struck, and the Thursday after it struck, NOLA.com, our online outlet, garnered more than 72 million page views. It would continue to see millions of page views a day for months after the storm, at the time a feat matched only by national papers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

As I would later tell federal agency public affairs managers, the 1.2 million New Orleans residents who left town in advance of Katrina – the largest US hurricane evacuation until that time – depended on our coverage to find out what was really happening to their city in the immediate aftermath of the storm.

Unfortunately, the federal government didn’t seem to be among those looking, according to more than 1,000 emails to and from then-FEMA Director Michael Brown. While staffers were collecting dozens of stories from national newspapers and sending them to Brown, no NOLA.com stories were included.

Missed were stories that we posted at 9:30 a.m. on August 29, the morning Katrina hit, that described how people were standing on rooftops in the Lower 9th Ward, where the floodwall had failed, or at about 11:30 a.m. that day reporting that firefighters in an apartment tower had seen a segment of the 17th Street Canal floodwall in westernmost New Orleans’ Lakeview neighborhood had failed and the neighborhood had filled with water.

I wrote that one. My pre-Katrina home was a dozen blocks from the wall failure. I knew that my home sat six feet below sea level in the bowl of New Orleans, and that’s when I knew Lake Pontchartrain was pouring in, with nothing to stop it from filling the bowl.

The intensity of interest in our online coverage – and the fact that we actually were unable to publish a print edition for three days after the storm hit, and then only a brief edition published on presses at the *Houma Courier* – helped shape the direction of our parent company, Advance Publications, to address the national trend of declining print advertising and declining print circulation by focusing full bore on online coverage. Indeed, it shaped the future of journalism from that point forward. A few months after the storm, the Pulitzer Prizes changed their rules to allow entries from entities that were publishing only online, a recognition of our situation after the storm, and of the immediacy of online journalism.

**Downsizing**

Fast forward to 2012, seven years after Katrina, and the *Times-Picayune* print edition cut its home delivery to only three days a week and made dramatic cuts in its news and printing staffs.

Today, in 2018, after several more downward adjustments, our subscribers are delivered papers on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday that are printed in Birmingham, Alabama. Our old news building has been sold. Most of the news and business staff moved to the top of an office tower downtown. In spring 2018, thanks to additional cuts to both news and business staffs, we moved to a smaller office space in the downtown area.

The downsizing in our staff has resulted in dramatic changes to New Orleans’ journalism diet – some bad and some good. A local businessman bought the *Baton Rouge Advocate* and immediately created a New Orleans edition to directly compete with us. That paper’s editor and publisher used to be managing editors at the *Times-Picayune*. Many of the paper’s New Orleans staffers were either reporters laid off by the *Times-Picayune* or reporters who jumped to jobs at that paper.

In response, my paper reversed course slightly, resuming the printing of street editions – but not home delivery – on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday.
Figure 13.1 “Katrina Takes Aim,” published by The Times-Picayune, August 28, 2005. The headline for the Mark Schleifstein story reads, “Katrina bulks up to become a perfect storm.” The image shows “westbound drivers [veering] into the normally eastbound lanes of Interstate 10 . . . as the state’s . . . contraflow plan gets its first workout.”

Source: Photograph by Alex Brandon, published with the permission of The Times-Picayune | The New Orleans Advocate.
Some of our reporters opted to work at The Lens, a newly formed online nonprofit, or Gambit, an alternative weekly. Several now work for local TV stations as investigative or sports reporters. Despite our own downsizing, our print subscription circulation remains more than double that of our new competitor, and our online circulation continues to grow, to more than a million page views and close to 200,000 unique viewers a day, during 2017, based on Parse.

In 2012, when the decision to downsize was being rolled out, I was actually on an unpaid furlough, and was out of town on a journalism fellowship in Florida. On my way out of town, reporters were calling me with updates, so that even before the New York Times’s David Carr broke the story, I had written my wife an email warning her of the news that was about to come. I joke that she responded by email that we had enough money that I could have retired right then . . . but she didn’t want me in the house.

That gave me the ability of making a decision to stay or go – if I was asked to stay – on my own terms. My terms were fairly simple: I believed – and still believe today – that the Times-Picayune remained the best vehicle for providing the public with key information on both hurricane flood risk and the state’s coastal restoration efforts, and that I would stick around as long as I was able to report on those subjects. My bosses agreed.

But, yes, things have changed dramatically over the last six years, in terms of what’s expected of nearly all reporters who in the past would have been called print reporters, and especially for journalists like me who cover the environment.

For environment reporters, the changes actually began long before 2012. According to Society of Environmental Journalists statistics, in 2002, its 1,203 members included 263 who self-identified as freelancers, while 341 members said they worked for newspapers and 26 worked for online media.

Fast forward to 2016, and the number who say they’re freelancers has skyrocketed to 395, while those who say they work for newspapers dropped to 151, and those saying they work for online media increased to 135, out of a total of 1,258 members. The numbers reflect the reality of how media have cut back on full-time staff positions for the environment beat, but are still interested in publishing environment stories, whether by using stories published by established news services like AP, the New York Times or the Washington Post, or by contracting with freelancers.

The changes have obviously been disruptive for those thrown into the freelance category by layoffs. But it’s also been disruptive in other ways for those of us who still work for traditional – or new traditional – media outlets, like me. I used to say I work for a website in a mall, but we moved out of the mall in 2018, so I will return to describing us as what we are: a startup media operation.

Relearning the practice of journalism

Beginning in 2012, we had to relearn how we practice journalism. Our stories are published online first, and then taken and reworked for our print edition, sometimes several days later. The web is a hard taskmaster and has different requirements than the print edition. The reporters create what you see online, and the assistance we get from other traditional newsroom positions has been dramatically truncated. In our newsroom, among the first positions jettisoned were artists. Our photo staff also has been cut and transitioned from photography to both photos and, more and more importantly, video.

Editors overseeing groups of reporters – and the reporters themselves – act as copy editors. A new team of staffers are focusing on social media, pushing our material and enticing
conversations about them on Facebook, Twitter, you name it. And the vacuum left by those changes has had to be filled by reporters. Thanks to the iPhone, we now must take our own pictures and video while on assignment, and even create or find graphics and other photos to accompany our stories.

We also have had to relearn how we do our jobs: We write the headlines. We put the links to other stories or websites into our web pages. On breaking stories, we also publish online immediately, relying on only ourselves to edit our stories, until an editor is available to look at what’s been published. The day of the copy desk, where copy editors read through stories word by word and then write a snappy headline, are over. Indeed, we’ve all been trained in search engine optimization, how to write a headline that is most likely to draw readers to the story by their web searches on Google for specific keywords.

I joke with our hurricane reporters that they have to find a way to put Brees – football quarterback Drew Brees – in the headline or story.

Publication can be on our own web page, on Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube. And that includes Facebook Live and live YouTube posts. As each new platform is rolled out on the web, we expect our bosses to add them to our repertoire. When our product hits the web, we’re the ones who are marketing it first, posting on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, you name it. The social team takes over from there. And when our readers post comments, we’re expected to review them and respond, or, if they’re inappropriate, to flag them to be removed. And, yes, today my copy often gets its best copy editing from my readers, who, thank heaven, have no qualms about pointing out my mistakes!

Residual risk

And that brings me back to what I still consider the nation’s biggest threat – residual risk. Science fiction author Ray Bradbury (1979) once said, “Living at risk is jumping off the cliff and building your wings on the way down.” As a resident of a city where half of its area is below sea level, and that has experienced flooding in hurricanes in 1893, 1915, 1947, 1965, 1969, and 2005, I’m very aware of the risk we face.

You see the gap between 1969 and 2005. That was because of levee improvements made after Hurricane Betsy in 1965 – as well as a pause in major hurricanes hitting the area.

Katrina in 2005, however, gave all of us a lesson in the risk we had ignored – residual risk. The easy definition is that residual risk is the threat that remains after all efforts to identify and eliminate risk have been made.

In 2002, we put together a series of stories called “Washing Away,” which identified key risks that we knew had increased since Hurricane Camille in 1969 – our levees were sinking and now were below the heights for which they’d been designed. And erosion of wetlands outside the levee system had increased the chances that our levees would be overtopped by the storms they’d been designed to protect us from.

In the aftermath of Katrina, it took us and the federal government quite a long time to conduct the research necessary to explain the residual risk issues we’d all missed: Floodwalls improperly designed, earthen levees improperly built, a levee built in tiny pieces over 40 years to differing standards along the way (a system in name only is how the post-Katrina forensic investigation labeled it), and the failure of everyone to address the obvious: we’d all been relying on past storms within our known history to set the boundaries of our risk, when the reality was that the BIG ONE was still out there.

Our post-Katrina reporting covered both the Corps’ design and construction failures and the Corps’ reconstruction efforts. We covered how the Corps dramatically improved the standards
Figure 13.2 “Man-made Disaster,” published by *The Times-Picayune*, December 8, 2005. The headline of the story by John McQuaid, Bob Marshall, and Mark Schleifstein reads, “100 days after Katrina, the evidence is clear that the great flood was a man-made disaster.” The story shows evidence that the levee system failures were “ill-fated disasters attributable to human mistakes.”

Source: Photograph by Donald McCrosky of Entergy, published with the permission of *The Times-Picayune | The New Orleans Advocate*. 
for levees and floodwalls nationwide and actually overbuilt both in New Orleans to add a new feature called resilience, the ability of both levees and floodwalls to still be there after a hurricane blows by, to reduce damage. And we covered how those levees were also raised a bit to take into account the effects of global warming, both in terms of higher storm surge and as much as a 15% increase in the strength of hurricanes over the 50-year design life of the structures.

We and the Corps also changed the way we described the levee system – no longer a hurricane protection system. It’s a risk reduction system.

And our reporting also covered in-depth the five-year process that the National Hurricane Center undertook to deal with their own residual risk issue: The public did not understand that their hurricane Category 1 through 5 system was originally supposed to only be about wind. The categories could not address varying risks of both winds and storm surge, which might affect widely different geographic areas of the coastline at different times and for different time lengths.

The result was a separate set of storm surge warnings that rolled out during 2017’s Atlantic hurricane season, accompanied by two different sets of colorful maps that were much easier for the public to understand. One shows areas of the coast that are subject to dangerous storm surges 48 hours in advance to landfall – watch and warning maps, with the areas adjusted for every six-hour forecast update.

The other is a map that shows what the expected surge level will be in color-coded feet above ground detail down to the street level in coastal communities. One glance, and a homeowner can know that the threat they’re facing is 3 feet or 6 feet or 9 feet or even higher water levels at their home or business. The hopes are that both will improve evacuation response in the future.

However, residual risk is a harsh taskmaster, and even as our focus was completely focused on the levee system and hurricanes, residual risk struck again.

The BP Deepwater Horizon accident and oil spill came two years before our changeover to mostly digital, but after staffing cuts had already begun. We were able to pivot and focus on the accident and its effects in 2010, but following the cuts in 2012, our staffing reductions might make it difficult to attack the next unexpected hit. One way of dealing with that risk is finding yet another way to break with tradition: find new ways to fund staff positions aimed at the risk.

Funding environmental journalism

In 2014, as a member of the board of directors of the Society of Environmental Journalists, I was able to focus the attention of environment journalists across the nation on the immediate effects of the spill and on Louisiana’s crisis of coastal erosion by chairing our national conference in New Orleans. Participants were able to see the issues up close through seven full-day and another seven half-day bus tours. The tours brought journalists face to face with the causes of erosion, the effects of the oil spill, and an introduction to what I call the world’s largest environmental restoration experiment – using billions of dollars in BP fine money to begin rebuilding Louisiana’s coastal wetlands.

The conference, it turns out, was sponsored by the Walton Family Foundation, yes, of Wal-Mart fame. The family members had been supporting a consortium of national and local environmental groups in support of the state’s coastal restoration program since 2008, and they thought the conference was a good way of getting coastal issues better play. Yes, as chairman of the conference, I was concerned about the potential for bias in this funding. But the reality was that Walton agreed to a hands-off approach to their funding and stuck to it. I was never asked by anyone with Walton to include any panels, panelists, tours, or experts – or to remove any – from
Figure 13.3  “BP Spill Blamed,” published by The Times-Picayune, May 21, 2015. The headline for the Mark Schleifstein story reads, “Study Links Deaths of Dolphins to Oil.” The story reports a study linking bottlenose dolphin deaths along the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico to the BP oil spill.

Source: Photograph by Cain Burdeau, published with the permission of The Times-Picayune | The New Orleans Advocate.
our conference. In fact, I was never contacted by Walton officials about what we were doing. As it turns out, that’s because our interests were exactly the same – to get as much information about coastal issues into the hands of the media and to let them determine its accuracy themselves.

Fast forward to SEJ’s 2016 conference in Sacramento, California. I had taken it upon myself to sit down with a Walton executive during one of our social events and suggested they might want to reprise their support for the 2018 conference, which focused on Flint, Michigan, and lead poisoning and its connection to water supplies. Nope, he said. We may be interested in one down the road elsewhere, but we’re taking that year off.

But the Walton executive said he’d been looking for me for another reason. Would NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune be interested in a grant from Walton to pay for two more reporters covering coastal issues?

Another of my residual risk concerns seemed to be on the verge of being solved. I’m 67 and have been concerned that it might be difficult for my bosses to find a qualified replacement when I retire in a couple of years. This seemed like it could be an answer, as long as there were no strings.

Walton suggested having the grant overseen by the Society of Environmental Journalists’ Fund for Environmental Journalism and agreed immediately to include a set of rules aimed at assuring that Walton does not have any control over our coverage decisions – what stories the reporters do or don’t cover – as long as they involve coastal environmental issues. As it turns out, we became the third local news organization to be assisted by Walton. The foundation had already funded a two-person coastal desk for the local NPR radio station WWNO, and a single position at the local nonprofit online news organization The Lens, with the money now being used to pay for freelance stories.

To be honest, I wasn’t sure our editors would go for the idea. But they liked it, especially the buffer against interference represented by SEJ. And they also recognized that, again, this was a sign of the changes nationwide in journalism. SEJ had handled similar grants from other funders for reporting positions in 2016 at the Los Angeles Times and the High Country News.

We hired two reporters in early 2017 – Tristan Baurick, who had been covering dam-busting and wildfire issues for the Kitsap Sun in Washington State, and Sara Sneath, who had been covering coastal environmental issues for the Victoria Advocate in Texas – and they’re doing gangbuster work, covering everything from the effects of a new invasive bug that’s devastating a coastal cane grass, to efforts to move a Native American community inland that’s living in homes threatened by subsidence and sea-level rise outside levees in the central part of the state’s coastline. Our grant extends for at least another two years. And I’ve already been talking to local foundations about the idea of stepping in to keep the team going, once the funding runs out.

The other directly journalism-related residual risk issue I see is how to provide local news organizations with other ways to supplement the resources they need to cover complicated issues of both local and national significance, and a way of getting those stories before both local and national audiences. The dramatic reduction in news reporters, especially reporters with experience, at newspapers across this nation is the ultimate residual risk – those papers no longer have the ability of keeping up with what’s happening in city and county council meetings and committee meetings. They’re no longer covering mundane beats like the sewer and water systems, or even local healthcare.

In our case, timing and connections helped us participate in what I hope was a successful demonstration of how to deal with that risk: conduct a joint national/local media project that can be replicated across the country. In October 2016, New York Times Executive Editor Dean Baquet was asked in an interview by the Harvard Nieman Lab’s Ken Doctor whether the Times
could improve the local press in the country. “There’s no way the Times-Picayune, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, or the Miami Herald can cover as much government and economics as they could when their staffs were three times bigger. That’s just not possible. I don’t know what the answer to it is.”

“Well, if we can figure out a model where the New York Times could improve the local press in the country, that could be your side job,” Doctor said.

“I would be game,” Baquet responded. “It’s a crisis.”

A senior executive at Advance Local, our parent company, saw that interview, and suggested to our editors that it might be time to take them up on it. The man for the job was Terry Baquet, Dean’s younger brother who was then editor of our print edition and now is director of community engagement for our operations. Terry called Dean and basically said, put up or shut up.

Within a few weeks, our senior editors and I, and their senior editors and one of their environment reporters, met in New York to discuss a joint project looking at how the state’s rapidly eroding coastline was threatening livelihoods of entire communities living outside levee systems, and how those inside New Orleans’ new levee system were not really protected adequately. The initial planning process was relatively painless. When I came to the Times-Picayune in 1984, Dean was the paper’s investigative reporter, and we’ve stayed friends ever since. Times environment reporter John Schwartz and I also have bumped into each other repeatedly since Katrina covering many of the same stories about coastal issues. Times reporter Kevin Sack added his investigative skills and writing expertise to our combined efforts, which also included Baurick and Sneath.

Including time off running after 2017’s hurricanes and other pressing stories that popped up, it took 10 months for our three coastal reporters and their two reporters to put together a set of three major stories that would be published as “The Drowning Coast” in the Times and “Our Drowning Coast” on NOLA.com and in the Times-Picayune. In both paper’s print editions, the stories were published as special sections. Online, they were published as separate stories, and we’re continuing to add follow-ups to discuss a variety of facets of these two broad topics.

The project was a twofer for me: addressing the risk that the journalism industry is facing and also addressing residual risk questions still outstanding involving our coastline and getting them before a national audience. How do communities outside existing levee systems deal with a future driven more and more by climate change’s rising seas, and how do hundreds of thousands of residents and thousands of businesses living inside the nation’s most modern levee system deal with the fact that the protection isn’t adequate to block storm surge damage caused by a major hurricane whose risk is comparatively small, but still likely to occur, maybe this summer or a summer fifty, a hundred, or five hundred years from now.

As my media outlet and others across the nation move forward in the 21st century, we’re going to have to make use of similar innovative techniques to address residual risk questions that will continue to pop up, whether driven by global warming, by changes in environmental regulation, or simply by the unknown.

Today, as part of my mitzvah mission, I have taken it upon myself to urge others to follow my lead in thinking outside the box to find new ways to assist local journalism in doing its job. Another organization that is already doing that is the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which this year is placing close to 30 young scientists – masters, doctorate, and post-doctorate students – into newsrooms across the country for summer internships aimed at giving them a taste of journalism and the newsrooms a taste of science. Here’s hoping other organizations will follow their lead.
References


