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# LESSONS FROM THE STORM

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

**W**hen 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

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## 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-

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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.

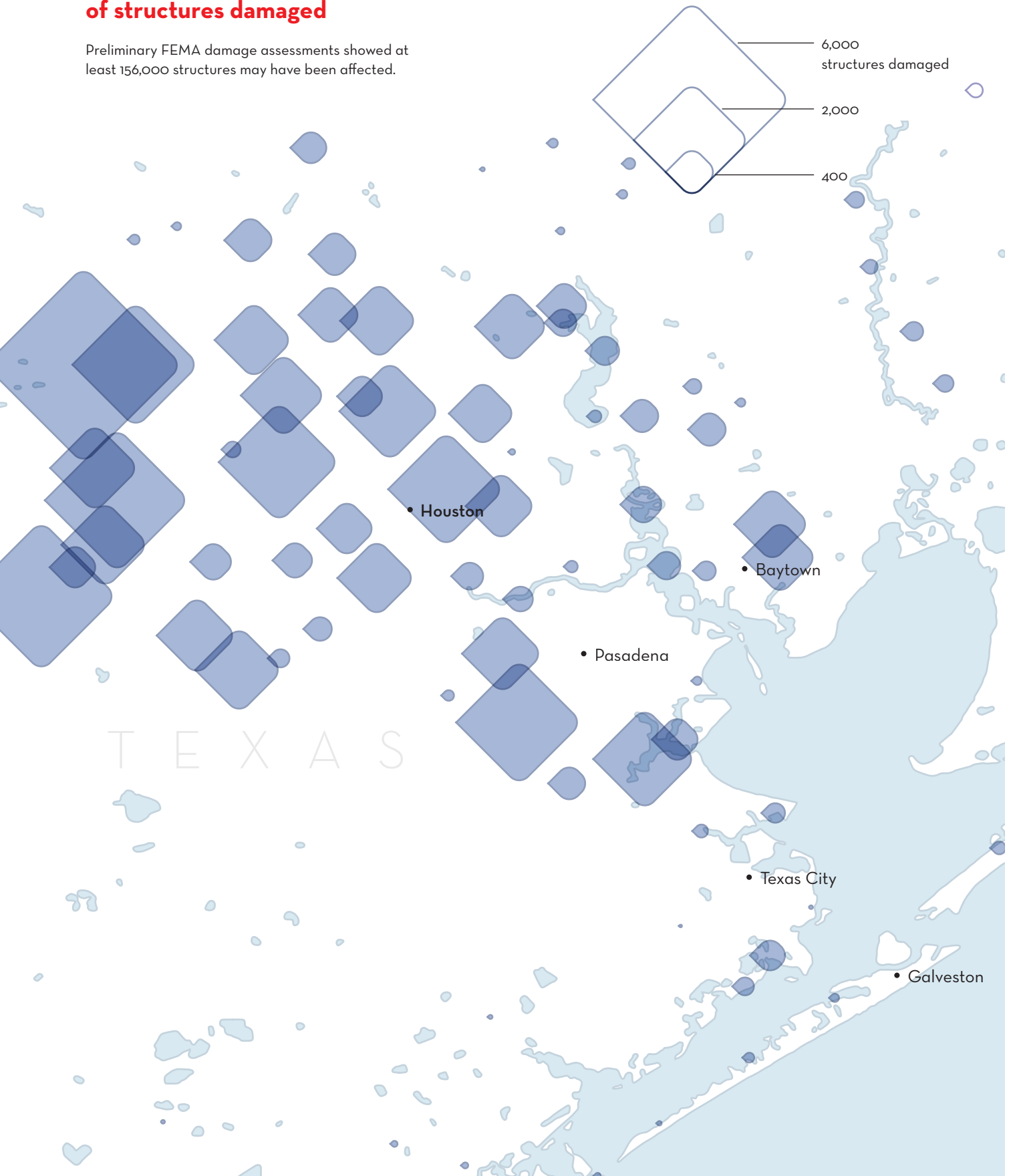
**How did you balance the ethical dilemma of helping people you're reporting on?**

**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. ♦

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