

Jersey Shore Information Needs Assessment

Jesse Hardman & Natalie Chang
January 2016

Table of Contents

- Executive Summary..... 3
- Background..... 4
- Interviewees..... 6
- Post Superstorm Sandy: Jersey Shore profile..... 7
- Local Information Ecosystem..... 11
- Key Findings..... 20
- Recommendations..... 21
- Conclusion.....23
- Contacts..... 24

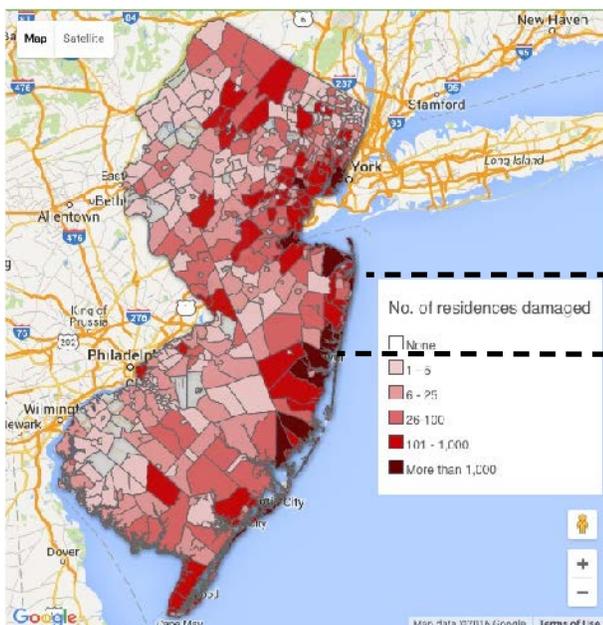


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Monmouth and Ocean Counties occupy New Jersey's northernmost coastal stretch, just south of New York City. The more than one million residents in this area were some of the hardest hit by Superstorm Sandy in 2012, with [thousands displaced from their homes](#), and the future viability of some area communities thrown into question. Researchers Jesse Hardman and Natalie Chang visited the region in December 2015 to look at the information needs of residents in Post-Sandy Jersey Shore communities, and identify new approaches for local journalism site Jersey Shore Hurricane News (JSHN) to sustain and expand its two-way conversation with citizens. JSHN is perceived by locals as a way to be heard and get essential, relevant hyperlocal reporting.

Three years, and three billion dollars in promised federal relief later, a lot of Jersey Shore natives are still struggling to get back on their feet. While federal agencies begin to transition away from Sandy affected areas, local service providers try to keep up with families still trying to repair their homes and lives. What we discovered in the course of our research is that one of the most prominent gaps in ongoing Sandy response is the lack of clear information about recovery resources. Families have struggled to get the right information about deadlines for assistance, shifting federal flood insurance standards, and where to access basic resources. While Sandy represented a crisis in many ways, local nonprofits indicated that the storm simply exposed and exacerbated issues that preexisted it, such as financial literacy, food access, housing affordability, and drug abuse. A local media culture of news saturation, heavily reliant on press releases, has not made things better. Local social service providers indicated a need for an established two-way conversation, where residents could both get and share information about their communities, raise important topics and questions, and have them covered more robustly by local media.

This assessment will recommend a number of both offline and online approaches for JSHN to expand its reach and impact in its target region, including partnering with existing community organizations to better reach the most vulnerable populations in the area with timely news and information. Acknowledging the ubiquity of cell phones, even among the poorest residents, JSHN will also be encouraged to establish a SMS system to reach an audience, and invite them to get and share news. Another recommendation includes the establishment of a regular physical presence around the Jersey Shore, where residents can interact in person with JSHN staff, and learn more about their unique news strategy.



A map showing the total number of homes and rental units damaged by Superstorm Sandy in New Jersey.

Source: NJ Department of Community Affairs

Monmouth County

Ocean County

Background

This information needs assessment is sponsored by the Geraldine Dodge Foundation, a New Jersey based organization that supports Arts, Education, Environment, and Informed Communities. Information needs assessments can help provide, through interviews with local stakeholders, a snapshot of how information moves through a community, what issues are most important to residents, and how best to expand the news conversation to a diverse audience. In this specific case, this assessment process also helped us develop a better understanding of the environment in which the principal grantee, Jersey Shore Hurricane News (JSHN), operates.

The Geraldine Dodge Foundation paired JSHN with Internews, an international NGO that has media development projects in more than 50 countries. Internews has begun utilizing its extensive knowledge of helping local media around the world become sustainable and effective stewards of information on projects here in the United States. Reporter and media developer Jesse Hardman is the creator of the community media project, The Listening Post in New Orleans, Louisiana, which he managed and implemented with Internews' support. He also serves as Internews' director and technical advisor for the partnership with JSHN. Hardman has been a reporter for two decades, and spent the past 10 years also working in international media development, training reporters, creating humanitarian information networks, and supporting community media in Pakistan, Mexico, Peru, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Tunisia, and more.

The Listening Post project takes insights and lessons learned from Internews and Hardman's international development work and applies them to communities around New Orleans, who are often excluded from the larger news conversation. Through creative offline outreach methods, and a text messaging service that enables the Listening Post to reach an audience of 1,200 participants

around the city, the project has created a diverse conversation about the most pressing local issues.

The Listening Post has dedicated itself to spreading its lens and megaphone throughout the city, by establishing recording posts in community centers and libraries where residents can record their experiences and thoughts about important topics. That audio has been shared online and on the air through local NPR station WWNO. The project has also used creative outreach methods, partnering with relevant topic experts (non-profits, city government, business leaders, citizens, etc.) and their networks, to reach new audiences and capture a representational perspective on issues.



The Listening Post New Orleans

Internews has a wider mission to support healthy information ecosystems, capable of serving communities with relevant and timely news. They traditionally manage projects related to human rights and media, health and environmental information, humanitarian communications, and governance and transparency. Internews will develop a toolkit that captures the Listening Post model and engagement strategies, so that anyone hoping to recreate the project in their own community is equipped with a methodology and tools for doing so. The larger goal is to share best practices for creating effective two-way information flows that can be applied by media all over the US. Natalie Chang is the Learning Manager for Internews' Design & Learning team and the lead writer for this toolkit.

JSHN is a Facebook based news site that provides hyperlocal information. Jersey Shore resident Justin Auciello created JSHN just before Hurricane Irene in 2011 as a way to counter rumors and confirm truths about the storm. He said he centered it on Facebook because, "I knew that's where the community was already gathering." Around 40,000 people started following JSHN in the wake of Irene, and after Superstorm Sandy hit a year later, that number rose to more than 220,000. That audience helps Auciello continue a conversation about what's happening along the Jersey Shore, or as he put it, "I call it a two-way news organization with a really deep culture of contributors."

reach the most vulnerable and isolated people in the community with news and information they can use; and 2) to expand JSHN's capacity to close communication and feedback loops between community members and those that can assist them, including community leaders. As Justin says, one of the strengths of JSHN is that "it responds" -- when people reach out to him, they can trust that he will follow up.

As part of a field visit to meet residents within the JSHN community, Jesse Hardman, Natalie Chang, and Justin Auciello met with and interviewed a variety of community stakeholders about information access and ongoing issues in the region related to

Superstorm Sandy. The trip took place over three days, from December 2-4, 2015, covering Ocean County, Monmouth County, and Philadelphia. Interviews were conducted with influential people who have contributed significant efforts to post-Sandy recovery, are trusted and perceived to be community leaders, have extensive social networks, and could speak from demonstrated personal experience to the needs, challenges, and experiences of local communities.



Justin has adapted the JSHN model since Sandy, expanding from mainly disaster coverage to general breaking news updates and community announcements. JSHN's audience can also access a JSHN news round-up by subscribing to a MailChimp newsletter. The JSHN Instagram page features images of the region from local contributors, and has more than 14,000 followers. Justin Auciello also contributes daily updates from the Jersey Shore for the WHY? sponsored hyperlocal news site Newsworks.org, which he frequently reposts on the JSHN Facebook page.

The goal of this current project is to research and further develop the community news model of the Listening Post New Orleans, and JSHN, to better serve post-disaster citizenry. The result will be a toolkit of lessons learned to share with media around the US to implement and mainstream the Listening Post tools and techniques within existing media initiatives, so that when future disasters occur, a ground-level two-way information channel is already established.

With the 3rd anniversary of Sandy passing, Auciello said he's noticed a drop off in the conversation on his site, but the information need remains steady. He wants to innovate the conversation, both online and offline, and position JSHN as a kind of participatory newswire that maintains a personal relationship with the communities it serves. His goals in the expansion of JSHN are two-fold: 1) "bring the online offline," and

INTERVIEWEES

PATRICIA DONAGHUE is the executive director of [The Peoples Pantry](#), a food pantry that began in Ocean County, New Jersey, a few weeks after Superstorm Sandy hit. Donaghue's pantry is not only still open more than three years after the storm; she said the need is more urgent now, as "even people who have gotten back home, now can't afford all the debt that they incurred." Donaghue is a central figure amongst the community of relief workers who still provide services along the Jersey Shore for families struggling because of Sandy. She is trying to establish a community focused, local emergency response team to not only deal with ongoing Sandy problems, but also to prepare for future disasters.

New Jersey native **SUE MARTICEK** worked as a Jersey Shore community liaison for FEMA right after Superstorm Sandy. She later shifted to her current job as the Executive Director of the [Ocean County Long Term Recovery Group](#), a nonprofit created in response to Superstorm Sandy that brings together community organizations, government agencies, faith based organizations, and citizens to help individual families struggling with Sandy related problems.

PAUL HULSE and **BILL SOUTHREY** run [Haven/Beat the Street Inc](#), a faith based nonprofit that focuses on aiding the homeless population along the Jersey Shore. Southrey ran a mission in Atlantic City for thirty years, and Hulse is a former plumber in Ocean County who was a first responder in the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, helping people back into their homes. A few years later he lost his job and began working as an outreach specialist to a growing number of tent villages popping up after Sandy.

GEORGE KASIMOS is a former real estate broker who started the advocacy organization [Stop FEMA Now](#) after losing his Jersey Shore home to flooding during Superstorm Sandy. Kasimos focuses on

helping educate the public about flood insurance premiums and FEMA policy.

ERIKA STAHL is Assistant Township Planner for [Toms River](#), the administrative seat of Ocean County, New Jersey. Stahl's office tried to point residents towards recovery funds in the wake of Sandy, and they organized information sessions on the weekends for people to learn more about their situation.

TREVOR NEWMAN is the Disaster Recovery Ombudsman for the town of Toms River, New Jersey. He was hired after the storm when Toms River officials were struggling to handle the volume of inquiries from residents about their post-Sandy problems. Newman is a local Toms River retiree with 40 years working in the insurance and construction industries.

JUSTIN AUCIELLO is a Jersey Shore resident and the founder of the news site Jersey Shore Hurricane News. Auciello works as a city planner and runs his 4 year old news site in his spare time. **KELLY SCHOTT** is a recent graduate from NYU's photography department, and helps Justin with JSHN. She currently runs the popular JSHN Instagram account which has more than 13,000 followers, and a new hashtag [#onejerseyshore](#) which highlights a different coastal community every month with photos, interviews, and videos.

POST SUPERSTORM SANDY: JERSEY SHORE PROFILE

Local Response Is A Long Term Thing

On a Thursday night in early December, 2015, Sue Marticek was having a drink with her friend Patricia Donaghue, and decompressing from a long work week. Marticek was just back from a trip to Washington DC where she'd met with FEMA representatives. As the Executive Director of the Ocean County Long Term Recovery Group, she was trying to make the case for 307 local residents who lost their homes in Sandy to get additional insurance claim money, "basically trying to get homeowners the money they should have been paid rightfully from their contract (federal flood insurance) 3 years ago." Marticek said underpayments on people's federal flood insurance claims are the number one reason the Jersey Shore is not further along in its recovery. She said while an appeal process allowed some homeowners to get more money from FEMA, not everyone was successful. An estimated 15,000 people were still displaced because of Superstorm Sandy as of February 2015, [according to some accounts](#).

Marticek said 2016 is going to be a kind of tipping point for families still trying to build their homes back after Superstorm Sandy because the federal allocated dollars for relief are almost gone. She said some of her clients, still waiting for federal recovery funds, will be left holding the bag, "these homeowners have to pay for mortgage, taxes, the insurance on a home, maybe the water bill on a

home they aren't living in." Marticek is worried that people's houses will be foreclosed on.

Sue Marticek and Patricia Donaghue sip on cocktails, and share details from the week. They refer to these Thursday meetups as "therapy." Sue Marticek said 3 years post Sandy, the small group of local recovery workers, like she and Patricia, are tight knit, "it's like having a foxhole buddy," said Marticek, referencing both the comradery of recovery work, but also the PTSD. While Sue had a career with FEMA before Sandy, Patricia was new to disaster relief. She was asked by an acquaintance to take over a food shelf, The Peoples Pantry, a resource center created in response to Sandy that has grown since the storm. "We are clocking 1,500 to 1,800 families a month," said Donaghue, "which translates to between five and eight thousand people a month," she said.

Patricia Donaghue said Superstorm Sandy exposed a lot of existing societal issues along the Jersey Shore, like affordable food access, that people were already dealing with. She said families have gone into debt using what money they have to cover mortgages, repairs, and home elevations. Donaghue said property taxes have also gone up significantly in Ocean County in the past five years, in part because of Sandy, although home foreclosures and Atlantic City's economic collapse also played a role. She said all of this has caused a lot of hardship for locals, "we're seeing solid middle class homeowners losing everything because they can't afford to stay in their homes anymore." Donaghue said a lot of people who wind up at her food pantry don't qualify for food stamps, because their incomes are too high, yet they can't make ends meet.

Keeping Up With The Most Vulnerable

61 year old Otha Pratt is one of those local residents who struggled before Superstorm Sandy. Afterwards, things only got worse. Pratt works part time with a local non-profit, Haven/Beat the Street Inc. and his wife works part time for the county. Pratt said their combined incomes are too high to qualify for welfare, but too low to survive on the Jersey Shore. "I can't even get food stamps," said Pratt, "the cost of living is through the roof." Pratt, originally from the Bronx, has battled homelessness and unemployment in the past. He said as he gets up in age, his job prospects are limited, and he's

wondering how he and his family are going to make ends meet. He said, “I’m about to lose my house, and I can’t get no help.”



Bill Southrey, Paul Hulse, and Otha Pratt

Paul Hulse and Bill Southrey trained and hired Pratt as part of their Haven/Beat the Street Inc organization, which focuses on helping the homeless populations who live in Ocean and Atlantic Counties. Hulse and Southrey establish indoor shelters in the winter months for residents who are living outdoors in tent encampments. Recently they passed out more than 200 winter coats, and are actively trying to find temporary housing for a variety of local residents. Hulse said some of the people they work with have been waiting for Sandy claims to come through, and ran out of resources to cover the wait. Hulse said he sees a variety of different cases of people that have been impacted by Sandy, “and just haven’t really found that next step.” A lot of people have been successful in getting their lives back since November, 2013, said Hulse, but, he said a lot of residents have been overlooked, “there’s still a lot of people in the gaps waiting.”

Navigating Disaster Assistance

Ocean County resident George Kosimos was initially one of the post-Sandy success stories. After a massive wave breached the area, stormwater was waist high on his street, and Kosimos escaped by boat to a dry area where his family had evacuated. A few months after the devastation, Kosimos was already gutting his home and getting on with the process of rebuilding. He was collecting flood insurance money, and things were looking in order. Kosimos said that’s when his neighbor stopped by

with some news, “if you don’t raise your home, your flood insurance is going to be **\$30,000 a year.**” Kosimos was used to spending around \$1,000 a year on flood insurance, and this was the first he’d heard of the federal flood map being reorganized, requiring residents in his neighborhood to elevate their homes in order to get insured. Kosimos said the timing was beyond rough, “I didn’t get the notice that I had to raise my home until I’m 80% done (rebuilding).” Kosimos said he was forced to tear down his house a second time, and now, 3 years after the storm, is rebuilding again, and living in an RV trailer with his family.

George Kosimos realized that many local residents had received mixed messages on rebuilding after Sandy from authorities like New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and FEMA, so he started holding meetings for people to talk about their situations and register complaints about insurance and contractor fraud. Eventually he started an advocacy organization called Stop FEMA Now, which has expanded into other states where flooding is an ongoing issue. Kosimos said expanding his network got voices heard that might not have been raised otherwise. His group helped push for FEMA to reopen some flood insurance claims for people who got too little recovery money to rebuild. He said this chapter is far from over, “the people who didn’t raise their homes that are required to, they’re (FEMA) talking about fines, evicting them from their homes.”



George Kosimos

Hyper-Local Solutions

On a Friday morning in early December, 2015, the City Planning office for Toms River had a line to the door. Contractors with building permits and blueprints tucked under their arms waited to be seen. Assistant Township Planner Erika Stahl said 3 years after the storm, 90% of her work is still Sandy related, despite the fact that federal and state disaster recovery application deadlines have long passed.

Stahl said a communication breakdown occurred because state and federal agencies didn't explain their disaster policies clearly. She said she organized weekend disaster recovery sessions that were packed, "we got stuck there like super late because all the federal and state agencies kept sending them (participants) to the local agencies for more information." Two informational meetings held at Ocean County College were completely sold out, with 600 people in attendance. Other than missing out completely on recovery aid, Stahl said a lot of homeowners were victims of FEMA's propensity of fining insurance companies who overestimated disaster claims. As a result, insurers underestimate claims, to avoid the penalty, meaning many people got underpaid.

When Sandy hit, Trevor Newman was living at one of the highest points in Toms River, where around 8,000 local homes and 5,000 businesses were impacted by the storm. Newman was recently retired from four decades of work in the insurance business when he saw a notice for a local government storm-recovery liaison. The job description read like his own personal history said Newman, "I said to the mayor when I sent the note, I thought I'd find my name at the bottom of

the list (job notice)." Newman began setting up meeting spots around Toms River where residents could come and ask questions about next steps with their homes. Newman could explain the flood

insurance claims process in ways people understood, and help them navigate the state and federal bureaucracies. He said he still gets at least 12 emails or calls a day from people seeking information about their post-Sandy situation. As Toms River is the only township with an Ombudsman position, Trevor often receives requests from "out of towners," people from other parts of the Jersey Shore, who don't have access to the same information resource in their community. There's hope Toms River will make Newman's Disaster Recovery Ombudsman job a regular city position with future storms in mind.

JSHN Emerges

Jersey Shore Hurricane News, or JSHN, was also inspired by natural disasters. Appearing just before Hurricane Isaac hit in

2012, the news project really hit stride a year later after Superstorm Sandy. Creator Justin Auciello said conceptually, the Facebook and Instagram focused media project is, "for the people, by the people," both a professional source of hyper-local information, but also a place where community members can ask questions, share anecdotes, and offer resources. A "hybrid of information and humanitarian relief," said Auciello. Like the other disaster responders documented in this assessment, Auciello is trying to adapt his project to be a longer term asset to his community. There's a need for an ongoing "two-way conversation," he said along the Jersey Shore, and Auciello's searching for a way to keep that information flow going even when a disaster isn't eminent.



JSHN's Instagram

What is an INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM?

"Information ecosystems" broadly refers to a loose, dynamic configuration of different sources, flows, producers, consumers, and sharers of information interacting within a defined community or space.

Within these systems, different types of news and information may be received from outside then passed on to others--through word of mouth, key community members, phone, the internet, and other channels and technologies. Beyond information infrastructure and landscape, an examination of an information ecosystem looks at the trust, influence, use, and impact of news and information.

THE EIGHT CRITICAL DIMENSIONS OF INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS



Local Information Ecosystem



Information needs

This dimension examines the information needs of different segments of the population, and how they change over time. It also looks at the degree that information needs are known to information providers.

It's clear there is an ongoing information need related to Sandy recovery, although the specifics of the information, and the methods for delivering it require a fluid approach. Based on conversations with stakeholders and social service providers within the target area of JSHN, post-Sandy Jersey Shore communities have struggled with access to information, prevalence of misinformation, and how to inspire news organizations to sustain in depth coverage of the recovery situation.

Toms River Disaster Recovery Ombudsman Trevor Newman has spent the past few years meeting with residents impacted by Superstorm Sandy. He said information needs are clearly implied through the ongoing questions people have, like, "what is my flood zone?" "how does my insurance work?" and "what is my flood elevation?" Newman said three years out, "recent inquiries are the same as the old inquiries." Many people are, "storm paralyzed," he said, still trying to figure out what their post-Sandy life looks like. According to community leaders interviewed for this assessment, 2016 will bring in a new phase of information needs related to post-Sandy recovery. Most recourses for additional

federal flood insurance monies are now exhausted for Sandy victims, meaning families that are still trying to fix or elevate homes will be facing a more permanent displacement, with foreclosures looming, and for some, eventual auctioning of their properties. Local residents are going to need information about how to move forward from these new challenges. Residents are also going to want continuing information on what efforts are being made by local, state, and federal agencies to develop flood and storm mitigation strategies, so that communities will be protected in the future. Other topics that were prominent in our conversations along the Jersey Shore included: contractor fraud, FEMA's flood map for the area, a rise in methamphetamine addiction, food access,



financial literacy, house foreclosures, a rise in property tax rates, sustainability of community organizations dedicated to ongoing Sandy relief, home elevation (how high should people raise their homes?), mental health and depression, the state of [New Jersey's Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, Elevation, and Mitigation program](#), issues related to local senior citizen population, use of vacation rental properties to house low-income renters during the off-season, and dune restoration and fortification.

Information landscape

The information landscape is composed of the physical and institutional infrastructures that support information production and flow, including media outlets, distribution systems, and production units. In addition, we examine the characteristics of information providers, including the media, government, private industry, and civil society, and their capacity to support robust information flows.

Monmouth and Ocean Counties are served by a variety of both traditional and new media outlets. There are around 25 radio stations, 11 TV stations, 2 daily newspapers, and around 20 weekly papers. Most of these outlets have websites. The Asbury Park Press is the largest local media outlet, and 3rd largest daily paper in New Jersey. The APP.com website does include separate hyperlocal categories for Ocean and Monmouth counties, and a section titled Press on Your Side where a reporter investigates a community inquiry.

Jersey Shore, Monmouth and Ocean Counties: Local Information Access

- 25 radio stations (New Jersey Public Radio)
- 2 Daily Newspapers (Asbury Park Press)
- 20 Weekly newspapers (The Coaster, TriCity News)
- Online (NJ.com, Patch.com, JSHN)
- Offline (hundreds of community billboards!)

NJ.com, the state's largest local news website, has hyperlocal options for counties around the state, including Ocean and Monmouth counties. The national hyperlocal news site Patch.com also has separate pages for many towns along the Jersey Shore. The Tom's River Patch.com site was cited a few times as being an important information source directly after Superstorm Sandy. Micromedia Publications Inc. puts out 7 weekly newspapers representing towns in Ocean and Monmouth counties, dedicated to local news and community dialogue. Both WNYC New York Public Radio and WHYY, Philadelphia Public Radio, reach parts of the Jersey Shore's listening audience. Neither media outlet is dedicated to hyperlocal news for the Shore, but WNYC is the umbrella for New Jersey Public Radio, and regularly puts out news features focusing on regional problems. WHYY incorporates the hyperlocal site Newsworks.org, which features the New Jersey focused investigative website NJspotlight.com.

New Voices: New Jersey, is another Geraldine Dodge Foundation

supported project seeking to create a two-conversation between local media and residents. A November forum organized by New Voices: New Jersey drew 120



participants, and brought together reporters and news consumers to talk about coverage and community input and impact.

A number of government-run websites, hotlines, and emergency messaging services are available to Jersey Shore residents related to emergencies, and ongoing Sandy issues. Some agencies even put out their own media productions, like Monmouth County's division on aging, disabilities and veteran services. NewsLines can be found online and in print form at government offices. It shares well-being tips and news about resources and services available to local residents.





Production and movement

Production and movement looks at the variety of information and the diversity of content within an information ecosystem, whether from the government, community news sources, social media, word of mouth, and other local information producers. It also examines the role of internet and mobile media as new and rapidly expanding sources of information.

Mainstream Media

The longstanding media outlet that most residents identified with, the Asbury Park Press, was acquired in the late nineties by Gannett, a publicly traded media conglomerate that increasingly focuses its news approach on digital strategies. This approach has resulted in shorter articles, aggregation of existing web content instead of original reporting, and less in-depth coverage of traditional topics, like the state legislature. Some residents reflected on this changing strategy as, “click bait,” meaning posts are meant to look enticing online instead of being substantive and useful to a local audience.

Other Sources

Residents can find specific information about post-Sandy resources on bulletin boards at city, township, and borough hall offices where local organizations and government agencies post fliers on topics like public health, employment, community services, Sandy recovery resources, and civic events. There also seems to be a culture of Jersey Shore restaurants, coffee shops, and other businesses hosting message boards where locals post community notices. These less formal, face to face information outposts continue to be a vital method for connecting with local audiences and having an ongoing information relationship with them and impact on them.

Community organizations, like Sue Marticek’s Ocean County Long Term Recovery Group, have been instrumental in getting updated Sandy recovery information into residents’ hands, and helping them meet deadlines. Marticek said between government

agencies, the business community, and community organizations, “the only thing that has truly worked is the non-profits.” Marticek’s agency advertised recovery workshops on social media and in the paper, and then held National Flood Insurance Program clinics along the Jersey Shore, walked people through the process, made copies of their paperwork, and helped them file it. Marticek said walking people through bureaucratic processes, in person, is really important, “you’re not dealing with homeowners who are having their best day when they lost every item that they’ve ever owned.”

Toms River, and a host of other Jersey Shore municipalities, offer an emergency text messaging service called [NIXLE](#) through their Offices of Emergency Management. Residents can subscribe online or by texting their Zip Code to a short code. Subscribers get traffic, weather, and other emergency alerts on their phones. Last fall NIXLE was used to send updates on Hurricane Joaquin as it neared the Jersey Shore.

Local non-profit manager Patricia Donaghue said news coverage of ongoing Sandy issues did pick up last October on the 3rd anniversary of the storm. While the coverage provided much needed insight on ongoing struggles, the articles published were a reminder of how, “out of sight, out of mind,” the Jersey Shore had become. Donaghue said the coverage was in many ways detrimental to her efforts as a local social aid provider, “coverage was ridiculously stupid. It was just like how great everything is and how far we’ve come.” She said images of a repaired boardwalk far outpaced images of the ongoing impact experienced by her neighbors, “houses that have been abandoned in neighborhoods that are mold ridden right now. You walk down the street and you smell it, and there’s a kid playing in the yard next door.”



Dynamic of access

This dimension focuses on the political, cultural, time, cost, and other factors that affect information flows. In particular, it seeks to identify any barriers to inclusive interaction and participation within an information ecosystem. Broader structures that influence access, such as legal, political, economic, and infrastructural factors are also included here.



In the immediate aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, Toms River Assistant Township Planner Erika Stahl said her office was receiving around 600 emails and hundreds of phone calls a day, so many that her department hired temporary staff to deal with the volume. People were trying to sort out how they were going to get back on their feet, and what resources were available to them. She said her office was good about posting grant applications and deadlines on the Toms River website, but said a lot of residents didn't get the message, and the recovery system was "opt-in" -- if people didn't know about aid, or weren't sure if they qualified, they missed out. Stahl said the deadlines came quickly within six months after the storm, "we always told them, apply, even if you don't think you're eligible. Let the state tell you no." Stahl said most Jersey Shore residents had cell phones, but not everyone was online, limiting some people's access to important recovery information and resources, like grant applications.

Stahl said right after the storm, local T.V. and newspapers were heavily relied on for important information, as well as the Patch.com website for Toms River. She said local officials were sharing important information through local media, in order to disseminate it quickly and widely. But over time Stahl said people migrated online to county and city websites to find the most accurate, up to date information about Sandy recovery. Stahl also said towns along the Jersey Shore were forced to cut budgets after the storm, leaving them with less funding to take care of resident's ongoing needs. She said she wishes the state of New Jersey would

have provided funding to municipalities to create a local newspaper dedicated to Post-Sandy information.

Local social service agencies established themselves as important information hubs in post Sandy New Jersey. Paul Hulse and Bill Southrey of Haven/Beat the Street Inc. said for the past three years they've been getting calls, "24 hours a day, seven days a week," from people seeking information not just about housing assistance, but all kinds of needs. Hulse said between the two of them they get around sixty calls a day. He gave the example of one woman who lost her housing who called earlier that day and asked, "I have three kids, where do I go?" Hulse and Southrey set up an information hub at their warming shelter where people can use a phone and get online. They help visitors connect with social service providers, and arrange appointments. Computer access is a huge help to clients, Hulse said, "it gives them an opportunity to either look for jobs or to try to find the area of help they're looking for." Hulse said most people who access his organization's services own [government provided cell phones](#), making it easier to follow up and ensure they're safe and get the help they need.

Bill Southrey also said some of the information services marketed to Sandy victims were easy to access, but didn't actually provide much help. He gave the example of the [2-1-1 hotline](#) run by the United Way as a service that was not reliable. Instead, Southrey and Hulse said Facebook was the best way to both connect with Jersey Shore residents, and share their realities with the rest of

the country.

State and federal agencies trying to mail alerts to residents regarding recovery aid deadlines and other resources had mixed success. Sue Marticek said the National Flood Insurance Program sent residents a letter to let them know about insurance claim deadlines, but thousands of families were displaced from their normal addresses and did not have mail forwarding.

Patricia Donaghue said she turned the front window at her People's Pantry food shelf into a kind of local front-page for Sandy information. She continues to post fliers related to social services so people who come in for food can find other resources too. "I am an information clearing house," said Donaghue, "I do emergency distribution and I point them in the direction of other organizations that can help." Donaghue said she became a point person for all kinds of services, not just food, after Sandy, having mental health experts, disaster recovery case managers, and grant managers stop by the pantry to connect with residents. She wanted to make sure she made the most of her captive audience, that they weren't just walking away with food, but also longer term solutions to their problems. Donaghue said schools and hospitals are also good places to post informational fliers along the Jersey Shore.



Information use

This dimension looks at what consumers do with information that they receive. It seeks to identify the factors influencing how information is understood, shared, and applied, such as content, medium/format, source, literacy, and relevance.

Less than a year after Superstorm Sandy, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie released an ad campaign with the slogan, "**Stronger Than the Storm.**" This was part of Christie's push to encourage a quick return to life as usual on the Jersey Shore. Ocean

County resident George Kosimos said initially he followed Christie's message, "rebuild after the storm, and we'll figure it out later." Kosimos said in hindsight, there was a lot more to know before he started rebuilding, "if you told me this from day one, I would have had all the information to make an educated decision." Three years later he's back living in an RV on a friends property after tearing down his initial rebuild, in order to elevate his home to federal flood standards.

After his difficult experience trying to rebuild, Kosimos

wanted to get the word out to friends and neighbors about how to navigate the recovery process, especially his frustrations dealing with FEMA. After consulting with his kids, Kosimos decided to create a Facebook public group called STOP FEMA Now, where people could get and share information on everything from insurance fraud, to contractor information, to FEMA and RREM applications and grants.

Erika Stahl said not everyone around the Jersey Shore was proactive in their quest for recovery assistance. Some people knew that deadlines for grant money existed, but they were still dealing with the fallout from the storm, "there's people that kind of hide their head in the sand," she said, "and those are the people that I think are the hardest hit, because all the money's gone." A third round of state recovery aid is still being awarded, but Stahl said the application process ended more than a year ago, meaning people who were slow to apply are now out of luck.

Patricia Donaghue said it's important to understand some of the cultural dynamics of information in



Jersey Shore communities. She said when residents applied for recovery aid and received a confusing or negative response the first time around, they were prone to stop trying to access assistance. Donaghue said residents needed somebody to explain that getting claims accepted by state and agencies might take multiple attempts, “say no to them once, they’ll leave the table, they will not come back.”



Information impact

This dimension looks at the relationship between information, knowledge, and larger scale behavior change, such as collective community action, policy change, and planning for the future. Broadly, it examines how information affects individual and community opportunity, well being, and development.

The most spectacular example of information impact in Post-Sandy New Jersey came last spring when a [60 Minutes](#) investigation of fraud related to FEMA flood claims was broadcast. In the report a FEMA representative admitted he had seen examples of flood claims being altered to minimize payments. Since then FEMA officials agreed to review every flood insurance claim filed by homeowners affected by Sandy. Sue Marticek said that meant FEMA had to revisit around 144,000 flood insurance claims on the East Coast, 36,000 of them in Ocean County. Marticek said last spring she helped a few hundred local residents refile their claims, but when she followed up with FEMA recently they revealed that 70% of the paperwork she helped Ocean County families submit was missing. Marticek said she told FEMA officials, “you have no idea what those six months have cost these families.”

Future storm mitigation strategies have gotten a boost from post-Sandy information campaigns. Tom’s River Assistant Township Planner Erika Stahl said residents now understand much better the importance of natural storm barriers, like the local dunes. She said dune protection used to be pushed by government, “now people get very angry about the fact that some residents don’t support it.” She

said there’s even threats by homeowners to sue private homeowner associations who are stalling dune restoration projects.

The STOP FEMA Now New Jersey page hosts an active daily two-way conversation where people share updates on federal recovery news. Recent posts included questions and community answers around rules of a recovery grant, feedback about which home elevation companies are best to work with, people celebrating success in receiving

DON'T GET SCAMMED!

CHARITY SCAMS ARE REAL

Faced with the devastation wrought by Superstorm Sandy, some people experience an especially strong desire to make charitable donations. Con-artists looking to make some quick money may try to exploit the generosity of strangers to their own advantage.

BEWARE OF SCAMMERS!

Before donating money to any charity, we strongly encourage you to verify the integrity of the organization by consulting the NJ Division of Consumer Affairs Directory of Registered Charities.

<http://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/charity/chardir.htm>
973-504-6215

The NJDCA online Directory of Registered Charities can be used to verify a charity is properly registered with the State, but you can also learn more about the charity’s specific income and expenses.

DO NOT DONATE MONEY TO CHARITIES WHO ARE NOT REGISTERED WITH THE NEW JERSEY DIVISION OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

CYBER SCAMS CAN HAPPEN TO YOU

As disaster relief efforts continue, many will fall prey to Internet scams. Here are some helpful tips to avoid being a victim:

- Do NOT respond to unsolicited or suspicious emails.
- Do NOT open any attachments contained in suspicious emails.
- Do NOT respond to emails asking for personal information or asking you to “verify” your information or confirm your user ID and/or password.

SOCIAL MEDIA SCAMS

- Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter can be home for fake victims or charities asking for donations. Check them out before you donate.
- News stories and videos claiming to have “shocking footage” of the storm may contain malware which can compromise your computer and the information stored in it. Be wary of these emails.
- Avoid clicking links to videos on Facebook or Twitter asking you to install new software. This software almost always is bad for you.

RECOGNIZE PRICE GOUGING

- Excessive price increases are illegal. If you suspect prices are too high, check with the New Jersey Consumer Affairs office at

www.NJConsumerAffairs.gov or call 800-242-5846

IDENTITY THEFT

People may pretend to be employed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or other government agencies, such as the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) or public utilities. These con artists may try to obtain personal information such as Social Security and bank account numbers. Remember: All authorized FEMA or SBA personnel display a laminated photo identification card, which they are required to wear at all times – a FEMA shirt or jacket is not absolute proof.

additional flood insurance money after reopening claims, and one person shared a photo of recent flooding in their neighborhood, and proclaimed, “I am so happy I raised my home.”

Paul Hulse and Bill Southrey have been using [Facebook](#), and a [GoFundMe](#) site to try and establish housing opportunities for homeless residents along the Jersey Shore. In addition to online methods, they’ve benefitted from referrals and also visiting ‘tent cities’ in the area, to provide temporary shelter during the winter months. Hulse said they’ve also succeeded in finding permanent housing for a variety of residents, “There’s nothing greater than seeing someone put their keys in the door for the first time. And for the longest time for some.”



Social trust

This dimension looks at trust in information sources, medium, and content, as well as characteristics and events that influence trust around information.

Established local media like TV, newspapers, and websites were relied on heavily after Sandy hit. Residents also shared on the ground information with each other via social media, creating a two way conversation with traditional news outlets, but also with online based sites like JSHN, which used its Facebook page to connect residents to resources and useful information.

Over time residents realized the limitations of traditional information sources and started to rely primarily on social media, government agencies, and community voices and organizations to get the most up to date, relevant information. Erika Stahl said Toms River officials, including the Mayor, took to local media to share news releases in the beginning, but overtime, she said, “some of them didn’t always get the facts correct.” Stahl said town officials began to direct locals to the government website for “accurate information.”

Stahl said the federal government and insurance agencies began to lose credibility with Jersey Shore residents after they started receiving their disaster claim money, and many got less than they expected. She said many insurance agencies filed small claims

so they wouldn’t be fined for overestimating damages by FEMA. Stahl said that’s when trust veered towards activism, “they’re angry about that, that’s why the whole STOP FEMA movement started”.

George Kosimos, founder of STOP FEMA Now, not only drew thousands of likes and members to multiple Facebook pages and groups, but he said he also spurred offline community engagement too. Kosimos said many of his posts led to phone calls, “people are like, hey man, I opened up my claim in May, I’m not even close to getting my money.” Early on Kosimos put the word out on Facebook that he wanted to actually meet people who were looking for help on his page. He said the initial meeting took place at a sandwich shop that was still open after the storm, and around 20 people showed up. A second meeting drew 250 people, and was written about in the Star Ledger, the largest newspaper in the state. His third meeting drew more than 500 people, and that’s when his small foray into activism got real, “it just kind of exploded, and we started having these meetings all over New York and New Jersey.”

Trust in information coming from state government sources also has waned around the Jersey Shore. Despite being re-elected governor in a landslide a year after Superstorm Sandy, Chris Christie’s profile took a hit. Residents question the effectiveness of the RREM assistance program, and Christie’s follow through in general. George Kosimos said he heard rumors that contractors had to contribute to Christie’s campaign in order to get Sandy work, “this is the most Republican county in New Jersey, and everybody turned on him.”

Homeless advocate Bill Southrey said he thinks government officials, like Governor Christie, forget their policies and the information they put out have real consequences. Southrey said Christie’s post Sandy efforts in Atlantic City made things worse, “36,000 people are unemployed and homelessness is growing in the city by leaps and bounds.”



Influencers

Influencers are the people, organizations, and institutions that affect how information flows throughout a community. We are also interested in seeing how influence can change over time, especially during or after a crisis.

Sue Marticek has a long history working with FEMA on disasters, and in her opinion, when it comes to Superstorm Sandy, “the only thing that has truly worked is the non-profits.” Whether run by established veterans, like Marticek, or relative newcomers, like former real estate broker turned activist George Kosimos, community organizations along the Jersey Shore have only grown in importance over the past three years.

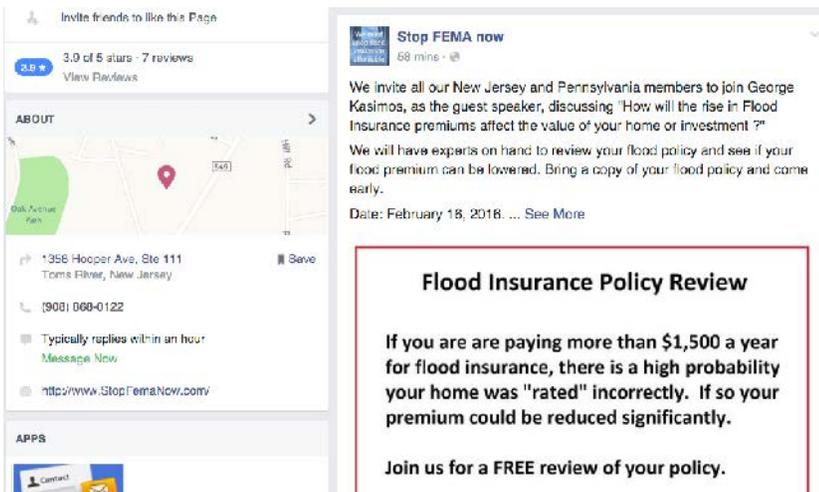
Marticek said the evidence that local non-profits are the ongoing support system for residents affected by Sandy is indisputable, “the work we are doing is noble work.” She said the federal government should make sure they support community responders financially, dedicating 10% of recovery aid to local organizations.

you to the real estate person to help you put your property on the market for the land, and then lets see if we can get you an apartment somewhere.”

The Township of Toms River became more effective with its constituents when it innovated its information sharing strategy. Instead of sticking with press releases and managing a growing backlog of emails and phone messages, the local government created a public liaison position to offer informational feedback to residents in need. Disaster Recovery Ombudsman Trevor Newman began holding office hours at police stations, firehouses, senior centers, and town hall, where residents could ask questions and get feedback from somebody who understood disaster recovery from the perspective of insurance and government. After he met with local residents and heard the specifics of their recovery issues, he advised them to stay in touch over email. Newman said email worked better for sharing the specifics of recovery assistance, “because I have tracks.”

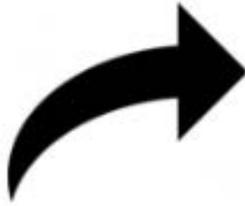
Facebook also seems to be a major influencer in Post-Sandy Jersey Shore recovery efforts. Every governmental and nonprofit relief organization working on Sandy issues has created Facebook pages in order to connect with residents. George

Kosimos’s STOP FEMA Now Facebook group has grown from a small following around Toms River, to a national phenomenon in communities impacted by natural disasters. Ohio, Hawaii, South Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, and Colorado all have STOP FEMA Now Facebook groups where people advocate for better federal assistance for disaster victims.



Marticek said her relief organization receives no government assistance. Patricia Donaghue’s Peoples Pantry doesn’t either, but she said it’s her organization that has been there for people through the entire recovery process, “our role has to be, let me hold your hand, let me get you connected to the person to help you file bankruptcy, let me connect

Listening Post Model



2 Way Conversation



News and Information Sharing



Community/Audience



Offline Engagement

Key Findings

1. Personal:

Face to face interaction with an audience is the best way to create community trust, and a long-term two-way conversation. Even with electronic media the need for a human interface for many is a matter of trust. Trusted individuals who can validate and perhaps curate info is a great value and access - as not everyone has direct access to mobile/internet, etc.

2. History:

Be cognizant of and sensitive to people's past experiences with news and information. Many Jersey Shore residents feel like victims of bad information or misinformation from government officials and media. There's a need to establish the reality of people's past experience - where trust and influence currently reside - and ways to build upon the current pathways - people, institutions, media, and informal sources.

3. Trust:

Build information outreach systems around existing trusted individuals and their networks. Find out who is effectively sharing information with different community groups, and partner with them.

4. Responsive:

Ask your audience what they would like to know and understand better, and how best to reach them with that information. However, keep in mind that people don't always know exactly what they want or need, or are unable to accurately articulate this (i.e. if you ask hypothetical questions, you will get hypothetical answers). Observation of behavior is really useful, so get out and spend time with a variety of communities.

5. Identity:

Establish an identity that separates you from the media pack. You want people to think of you as a trusted information tool that they can access when

they need it. It would be great to get locals to help co-design and develop this identity across physical places, people, and tools. The overall JSHN brand will have key elements in any given situation, but will be localized to the appropriate contexts, needs and experiences of the audience.

6. Proactive:

Find ways to keep your audience looking forward, sharing thoughts and information with you that push stories forward. Don't just ask about the last storm, make sure you explore peoples thoughts on the next one.

Recommendations

1. Build partnerships with individuals and organizations in this assessment to magnify JSHN's impact:

The majority of the sources for this assessment had either not heard of JSHN, or had heard of the news site, but were not aware of its impact. Meeting with these stakeholders, who are connected to their own dedicated networks of community members, will provide new and expanded audiences for JSHN, important advocates and additional information sources for JSHN, and collaborators who can both share important information to disseminate to the community at large, and also help distribute news content created by JSHN more widely.

2. Tap into community partner networks to share and attend community partner events and meetings:

Collaborate with community partners on sharing information about important news topics. These collaborations enable JSHN to tap into existing networks created by local nonprofits, businesses, and government agencies. By partnering on getting information out, these organizations are more likely to share their networks (cell-phone, email, social media). Also, make an effort to connect with local nonprofits, businesses, and governmental agencies on public meetings and events they are hosting. These can be opportunities to get facetime with new audiences, and learn more about local information needs and interests. For example, Sue Marticek is still hosting monthly meetings through her [Ocean County Long Term Recovery Group](#) for residents struggling with insurance claims.

3. Host community forums to reach new audiences:

[New Voices: New Jersey](#) hosted a successful forum at Rutgers University last November where

residents and local journalists talked about important issues to cover, and how community members are integral to sustained, quality reporting. This type of forum can help JSHN make the case to consumers why it's an important part of the local information ecosystem, and also help expand JSHN's audience. JSHN might even consider collaborating with New Voices: New Jersey on putting together a joint forum.

4. Collaborate with Internews on a survey to better understand JSHN's audience and their information needs:

Work with the Internews team to create a short survey that can be shared via JSHN's Facebook page that will help document residents ongoing information needs, determine best practices for expanding the local conversation around important news topics, and best practices for reaching community members with important information. [See suggested survey questions here:](#) <http://bit.ly/20z3TIB>

5. Identify a few key topics that JSHN wants to investigate more deeply:

Pick a few topics to focus a conversation around, based on this assessment, meetings with the interviewees identified in this document, and the information needs assessment. These are topics that JSHN will explore through more in-depth reporting, crowdsourcing, and even public events. This will achieve two goals: 1) serve as a branding opportunity to position JSHN as the go to source on a few specific issues that are important to people on the Jersey Shore; and 2) allow JSHN to develop expertise on a few important topics, as opposed to trying to do more general coverage which bigger media are already doing.

6. Create cell phone outreach system to improve community engagement:

As part of the GroundSource SMS platform, JSHN now has access to a local number, 908-768-3897, that it can use to communicate with people on the Jersey Shore to share information and ask

questions. Because cell phones are now ubiquitous, even among lower income communities in the US, this system is ideal for reaching a wide range of residents to expand the two-way communication system developed by JSHN via its Facebook page. This offers an opportunity to create a more immediate conversation around topics impacting the region, and to recruit sources, crowdsource issues, and send news alerts. It will also allow JSHN to begin building a profile of its audience while monitoring and evaluating its impact through subscriber data.

7. Create a physical presence in strategic spots around the Jersey Shore:

The Listening Post New Orleans has had success posting questions on public signs to inspire participation and stir conversation about different topics in New Orleans. These signs invite people to text message a posted number, and from there, the Listening Post can maintain an ongoing information relationship. Finding a way to be physically in front of an audience in places like bulletin boards at coffee shops, the boardwalk, popular bars and restaurants, stripmall parking lots, and government offices reminds people of the service you are providing, and enables you to catch them offline (something they are less used to now) and reconnect over time through online methods.

8. Office Hours:

Piggyback on the effective strategy used by Toms River Disaster Recovery Ombudsman Trevor Newman. Promote an "office hours" event where you set up a desk somewhere accessible and central, and people are able to come, learn about JSHN, and register questions with staff. JSHN then finds answers, and shares them with a wider audience.

You might also create some kind of kiosk that you can set up in different communities for a week, or month at a time, and hold office hours there, and also collaborate with a local partner to update community news and information on the kiosk.

Conclusion

People's Pantry executive director Patricia Donaghue said if there's one thing that's been learned from the experience of Superstorm Sandy, "there is no white knight coming." Donaghue's goal, echoed by all the interviewees in this assessment, is to help people move forward, or as she put it, "trying to help un-stick the people." One of the best ways to help people on the Jersey Shore regain and sustain self agency is through reliable, accessible information. If residents better understand the situation around them, and their ability to take action, they can make better decisions about their families and their futures.

JSHN so far has shown an amazing ability to attract a large audience, 200,000 Facebook followers, with very little resources. We believe that JSHN is poised to establish itself even further as a go-to information hub by partnering with local organizations to investigate and disseminate information about key community topics, and to find new, interactive ways to reach and impact an expanded audience that may not already be aware of the news service.

One lesson learned from post-Katrina New Orleans is that the underlying societal issues that made life so challenging after the storm were there before the hurricane as well. New Orleans getting repaired cosmetically has not meant long standing communities are back to normal. Life is still a real challenge in New Orleans for the majority of the population, and access to information plays a key role in people's ability to navigate their day to day issues. Residents along the Jersey Shore are experiencing their own version of this scenario now, and are no doubt wondering how things are going to turn out. JSHN can help connect locals to information that will explain the fluid realities of recovery, and what their best steps forward can be.

