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Charleston's Media Felt Fury of Hurricane

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In the wake of Hurricane Hugo, media outlets in the Charleston, S.C., area are struggling to return to the air or onto the streets to serve news-starved listeners and readers.

With much of coastal South Carolina still powerless, many residents are relying on newspapers and radio reports for information on the availability of food, water and gasoline. Although some radio stations have been able to resume broadcasting, only one TV station, WCBD/Channel 2, was on the air Monday with full power.

At The Charleston Post-Courier, suburban editor Jack Hawkins boasted that thanks to a gasoline-powered generator, his newspaper hadn't missed a single edition since Hugo took aim Thursday. The paper was smaller, only 24 pages Sunday, and delivery was spotty, but street sales were strong.

"In Charleston right now," he said, "a newspaper is a very hot item."
Mr. Hawkins said a contingent of reporters,

photographers, composing room and pressroom staffers rode out the hurricane in the newspaper's downtown building, sleeping under desks and in offices. Press time was pushed back a couple of hours. When Charlestonians emerged from their homes Friday morning, they were met with newspapers bearing the headline "Charleston Is Ground Zero."

In contrast, in Savannah, where forecasters first thought Hugo would hit, Savannah News-Press executive editor Wallace Lavis said deadlines were moved up to allow employees to go home early. "We printed the morning paper at 7 p.m. Thursday so we could get it out before the wind and rain got so bad," he said. "You have to be careful."

As the storm neared Charleston, the city's NBC and CBS affiliates — WCIV/Channel 4 and WCSC/Channel 5 — bailed out for higher ground, according to Mark Pimentel, news director at the ABC affiliate, WCBD/Channel 2. Mr. Pimentel, who left Atlanta's WSB/Channel 2 two weeks earlier, said Channel 4 signed off at 4:30 p.m. and Channel 5 at 5:30 p.m.

"We evacuated our studios around 6:30 p.m. but had developed a plan to broadcast from three other spots," he said. "We stayed on until about 11:45 p.m. when the transmitter was blown off the air. Our 2,000-foot tower survived, and we were back on the air at about 6:45 a.m."

"Some people are calling and telling us we helped save their lives."

Another TV station, WTAT/Channel 24, lost its tower in the storm and still is off the air.

Most radio stations are trying to begin rebroadcasting. WEZI-FM is on the air again and is alternating between country music and news announcements.

One of the few sources of news Charlestonians had after the hurricane was WPDQ (690-AM), a Jacksonville, Fla., station that increased its nighttime power to 50,000 watts Thursday in order to broadcast to the city.

WPDQ news director Jack Ingram said the station dropped its oldest-talk format and went to all-news programming Thursday, acting as a clearinghouse for information about friends and family in Charleston.