

Rising from Ruin: Two towns rebuild after Katrina

MSNBC.com – <http://risingfromruin.msnbc.com>

GOALS

To put the massive recovery effort following Hurricane Katrina into perspective by following one of the hardest hit areas as it struggles to rebuild. We wanted to transport our users to the towns so that they could experience the destruction and get intimate with the residents' personal stories in a way only the web could deliver. In doing so, we hoped to create interaction and community beyond the towns' physical location. From the beginning we committed to continuing our coverage consistently for at least a full year.

APPROACH

Rising from Ruin was built as a mini site outside of the MSNBC publishing system using TypePad. Our custom templates featured large panoramic images in an attempt to show the scale of devastation, multimedia blog posts from our staff, blog posts by local residents and editorially approved comments from users, as well as a virtual tour of the area featuring 360-degree video mapped to Virtual Earth. Between mid-September and early January, we maintained a permanent presence of at least one writer/editor and one multimedia producer in the towns by rotating teams in and out. Since then we've maintained a monthly presence and will continue to report from coastal Mississippi.

TEAM

- Writer/editors: 10
- Multimedia editors: 5
- Designers: 1
- Technical producers: 3
- Others:
 - 1 MS Researcher
 - 1 MS MapPoint staffer
 - 8 citizen bloggers

TIMELINE

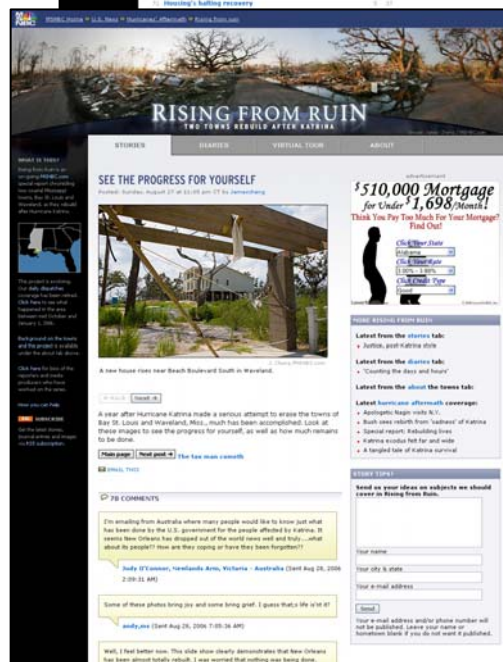
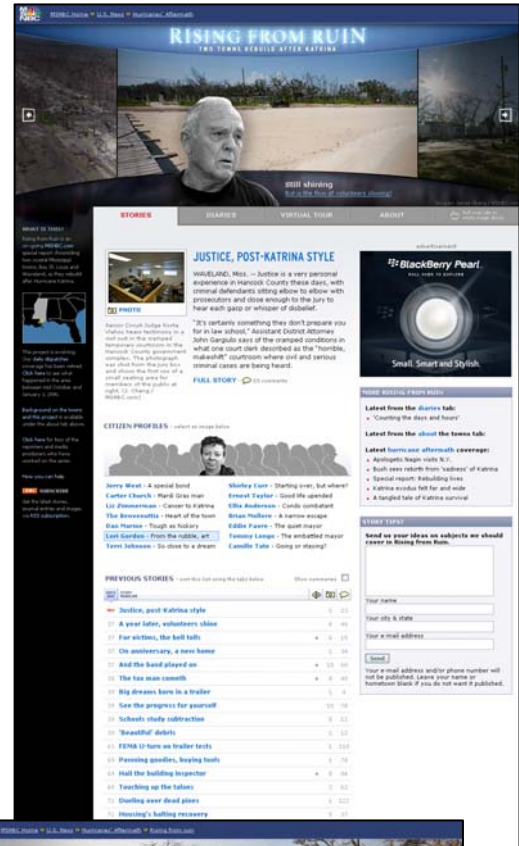
- Oct. 1, 2005: planning started
- Oct. 18, 2005: project launched
- Oct. 2005 - Jan. 2006: daily post / stories / multimedia
- Feb. 2006 – monthly posts / stories / multimedia
- Sept. 2006 – quarterly posts / stories / multimedia

BUDGET

\$50,000+ (mostly travel-related), not sponsored supported

TRAFFIC

Est. 1.5+ million unique users, 4+ million page views



TECHNOLOGIES

- TypePad (hosted weblog platform)
- XHTML
- JavaScript
- CSS
- Flash
- Microsoft Virtual Earth mapping technology

LESSONS LEARNED

- Reader comments in response to stories can be very powerful. Hundreds of users offered to help town residents rebuild. However, reading and approving every comment that users submitted proved to be a big workflow problem given the volume. We need to plan better for this.
- Hosted blog platforms like TypePad provide quick freedom from publishing systems—at a price. In our case, the service went down frequently, leaving us unable to publish new content and occasionally rendering the site unavailable to the public.
- To our knowledge, this is the first news project to use 360-degree video. Workflow was difficult and entirely undefined. The equipment was fragile. And on top of that, we tied the experience to Virtual Earth's API, which changed several times during development. The results are amazing, but it took months longer to achieve than expected. Experiments should be smaller in scale.
- RVs can provide cost-effective housing and office space for field work in devastated areas, but they can be difficult to keep clean and tend to break down under constant heavy use.

