

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

Cool Hand Luke Meets Karen Hughes ^[1]

As the prison road boss remarked to the Paul Newman character in the classic 1967 movie "Cool Hand Luke," "What we got here is...failure to communicate."

There were many examples of this failure to communicate during hurricane Katrina as it swept through the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi, but one comes indelibly to mind: a TV news interview with a rescue worker standing chest-deep in water near New Orleans. The rescuer said a helicopter overhead could not communicate with him by radio, and so the helicopter pilot put his message in a bottle and lowered it by rope to the waterline below.

One reason for this primitive step, as later revealed, is that there is a lack of radio frequencies for emergency communications. The government gave away much of that broadcast spectrum to TV stations (which ironically love to program fictional "survivor" shows) so they could use the extra bandwidth for high definition TV channels, something few of them have done. The Federal Communications Commission, which regulates the broadcast spectrum, says it is looking into this inaction, and so too will Congress, which oversees the FCC and knew about the problem years ago.

And so because human rescue attempts had to be conducted with the use of messages stuffed in bottles -- only half a step up from tin cans and strings -- more people probably died. While the FCC began to review its broadcast spectrum policies, an entire busload of 24 nursing home residents fleeing hurricane Rita were incinerated in the fire that consumed their vehicle as it was stuck in highway traffic near Dallas. Rescue workers could not reach them in time. Contributing to the nightmarish traffic jam throughout eastern Texas was perhaps another failure to communicate: Motorists should have been reminded in advance to gas up their cars, which many failed to do. Cars ran dry, and so did gas station pumps, along escape routes.

But as the news media begin to pile on federal, state, and local authorities for their failures to communicate, the media are confronted face-to-face with their own failures to communicate, as evidenced by declining readership of newspapers and news magazines.

Between landfalls of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, the New York Times announced a staggering number of 500 job reductions in its company properties, including those in New York and the Boston Globe. The Times Company had already reduced its work force by 200 earlier this year. And last week the Philadelphia Daily News and Inquirer announced 100 job reductions.

The print media believe they can do a better job communicating with younger persons, who are defecting from ink-on-paper, by turning to the Internet.

The Associated Press on Sept.19 launched a news service for 20 and 30 somethings, called asap, pronounced "a-s-a-p," says its press release

The Miami Herald has been totally reformatted to make it more appealing to busy readers who are used to browsing web sites.

The Washington Post recently launched a blog on the opinion pages of its website.

Nudging new business models is the increasingly violent nature of the world in which we live, and the penchant, the urge, among the curious to become informed quickly and intimately.

Since the runup to the Iraq war, newspaper and news magazines have failed to communicate to many. Readership has remained essentially flat on Iraq and other major stories, including the tsunami in Thailand and the Indian Ocean, and the terrorist bombings in London. Meanwhile, Internet news portals, including those abroad, have become more popular.

An interesting phenomenon occurred with the onset of the Iraq war, when more Americans began to seek information from media abroad. According to Nielsen/Net Ratings, at the onset of the Iraq war, half of the visitors to Britain's Guardian Unlimited news site were from Americans. The Guardian's web site had a 10 percent increase in visitors. The number of visitors to the Australian Broadcasting Corp.'s website increased, while the number of visitors to CNN's website declined, according to Wired News.

Conversely, news portals abroad, like al-Jazeera, crib much of their content from portals in the U.S. and elsewhere that reflect the views of their readers and viewers, with whom they effectively communicate. It saves money by using the work of others, and sites derive energy from those sources, without expending any themselves. Objectivity is of no matter.

On the fourth anniversary of 9/11, al-Jazeera featured a story on its web site's home page that included an image of the World Trade tower crumbling to earth, with text stating, "As Hitler was rising to power in the 1930s, someone did him the favor of burning the Reichstag, the German Parliament. A lot of analysts said that the Nazis burnt it down themselves. Actually, a lot of Americans support the theory that Bush's admin (istration) brought down the World Center itself."

(The story was, in fact, an article taken from the American website Common Dreams, which boasts itself as a "must read" for talk show host Don Imus and PBS's Bill Moyers. But the Al-Jazeera reprint was a distortion of the original article by Harvey Wasserman which said: "Few Americans believe the Bush Administration itself brought down the World Trade Center last year. But the conviction is widespread throughout Europe and the Muslim world, and for good reason.")

Another story from the UK's Independent and Common Dreams, comparing Iraq to Vietnam, was featured as the lead item on al-Jazeera's home page Sept. 22.

While print media in the U.S. ponder how to communicate better to regain readership, and the FCC decides how much of the broadcast spectrum should be re-assigned to real survivor communications, and not those depicting by shapely young actors on TV survival shows, U.S. State Department officials are traveling abroad so they can listen to what people there have to say, so the United States can learn how to communicate more effectively with them.

When Karen Hughes, undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, and her

assistant secretary, Dina Powell, who succeeded others who have failed to communicate, return from their listening trip to the Middle East, they should take a look at [Nielsen's !\[\]\(cead67df4d82d6c83effe4f8699a7d8f_img.jpg\) Internet ratings](#) which show that the U.S. government is in the top ten of the most popular websites - No. 6 in world popularity to be precise - immediately behind such giants as Yahoo, Google, and eBay, but ahead of Amazon, Real!Networks and Viacom International.

I'm not talking about branding America or political hype on U.S. government web sites, but rather harnessing the energy of the greatest country on earth into the greatest Internet search engine in the world for learning, to better communicate with the world. You don't need to hop a plane anymore to listen, you can listen and work the crowd from your desktop -- a lot more effectively than Cool Hand Luke and his guard overseer were able to communicate in 1967.
