



Media Relations and Effective Evacuations of Gulf Coast Communities

by Scott E. Robinson and Joseph W. Reed

Local emergency management organizations (LEMOs) provide a wide variety of services to their communities—many of which are relatively unknown to the people they serve. The unheralded nature of LEMOs' work can have a significant negative impact on these organizations.

A LEMO that operates quietly beneath the radar of most local residents is an organization that will likely find it difficult to justify continued funding (particularly in the absence of a recent, memorable disaster) or to disseminate information to the public about issues ranging from preparedness activities to evacuations. In this environment, it is essential for LEMOs to develop a strategy to raise awareness about their activities within the community. Doing so calls for an appreciation of the dynamics of media coverage of emergency management.

Evacuation Hosting and Local Emergency Management

Evacuation hosting is just one of the many activities LEMOs may find themselves involved in organizing. There are specific and often ignored complications of hosting evacuees who have fled their own community due to a disaster such as a hurricane, flood, or forest fire. In particular, LEMOs play a key role in facilitating collaboration among services provided to hosted evacuees.

There is considerable attention to problems associated with evacuating populations. However, we know little about how to host evacuees. For instance, if a large number of people leave a Gulf Coast community in anticipation of a hurricane, local authorities have developed a variety of techniques (some based on engineering

principles and some based on effective emergency management practices) to move residents out of harm's way. But there is little information on how best to organize services for evacuees when they arrive at a host location.

Local organizations are just beginning to come to grips with the diverse array of needs of displaced residents. Many think that sheltering is a simple operation—often delegated to the American Red Cross. Once a significant number of evacuees enter a community, though, the complexity of their individual needs become clear.

You cannot simply hand evacuees a cot and assume they can take care of themselves. Evacuees may need medical attention, arrive without necessary medical prescriptions, or need complicated medical support services such as dialysis. Evacuees also will likely need food service. This seems simple until you realize you may need to serve thousands of meals at a site that is unaccustomed to sustaining this amount of people and food.

Furthermore, you may need to entertain evacuees, particularly children. Likewise, local authorities will need to provide evacuees with means to travel to shopping facilities for needs such as clothes and other necessities. Such entertainment and support activities call for coordination of additional transportation activities.

The complexity of such needs often call for the support of LEMOs along with a variety of other providers. Local public health officials will need to help coordinate meeting special medical needs; local voluntary and religious organizations often assist with feeding and shelter administration; and local law enforcement and public transportation agencies typically provide assistance in evacuee transportation.

Media Reported Networks in Evacuation Hosting

Given the diversity of organizations required to provide services to evacuees hosted within a community, it is interesting to see how broad media outlets characterize an evacuation hosting network. Consider the media accounts from two similar communities: Brazos County, Texas, and Shreveport, Louisiana.

Brazos County, Texas

Brazos County includes the cities of College Station and Bryan, as well as Texas A&M University (TAMU), which is a large, public university that enrolls nearly 50,000 students. This area sits inland from the Texas Gulf Coast along a major evacuation route from parts of East Texas, including Houston.

Over the past decade, the area has served as a host community for a variety of hurricanes, including Katrina, Rita, and Ike. Table 1 illustrates the number of mentions various organizations within the community received in articles pertaining to evacuations.

The distribution of media mentions makes clear that there is indeed a centralized network. The prominent university is the most frequently mentioned organization by a wide margin. Following the prominent university are a high school and another local university that transferred many students.

The centrality of the university would be all the more remarkable if general university mentions are combined with mentions of TAMU's Hazard Reduction and Recovery Center. The final two most frequently mentioned organizations (El Dorado Chemical Company and Texas Council on Environmental Quality) were involved in a local evacuation brought on by a chemical release.

To illustrate the degree of centralization, Figure 1 visualizes the degree of media-reported connections between these organizations. This figure drives home the point that the most frequently mentioned organization plays a dominant role in the media-reported network.

Shreveport, Louisiana

Shreveport is also an inland community within a state that has experienced significant evacuation activities. Similar in size to the Brazos County area, Shreveport serves as a comparison case. Unlike Brazos, however, it does not contain a single organization that dominates the economy and culture as is the case with TAMU. As a result, there is less reason to expect centralized media coverage.

Overall, the media reports in Shreveport mentioned approximately the same number of organizations (96 in Shreveport versus 89 in Brazos County). There is still evidence of strong centralization in the media reports, however. Table 2 reports the media mentions of organizations in the Shreveport media analysis.

Table 1 | Number of Media Mentions by Organization in Brazos County

Organization	Number of Media Mentions
Texas A&M University	121
Bryan High School	34
El Dorado Chemical Company	28
TAMU Hazard Reduction & Recovery Center	27
Texas Council on Environmental Quality	24
Tulane University	15
All Others (n=83)	<10

Again a centralized network with a handful of organizations receives the lion's share of attention. This time it is national and state-level actors that caught the media's attention. The network here is dominated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), DHS itself, and the American Red Cross.

These organizations are followed by state agencies, including a large state university (Louisiana State University), the state unit of the National Guard, and a state health center. Figure 2 provides a visualization of the centralized network of media reports.

Recommendations for LEMOs

LEMOs are active players in providing services to evacuees hosted within the community. Interviews with representatives of these organizations are convinced that successful hosting activities depend critically on the effort and expertise of these local players. This leaves two important questions:

- Why are LEMOs invisible to the media covering these activities?
- What can LEMOs do to become visible to these media outlets?

The key to answering both questions is in the centralized nature of media reports and who actually captures the media's attention.

Recommendation #1: Borrowing Familiarity

The actors that dominate media reported networks are familiar organizations to both the general public and the journalists. This creates a vicious cycle. Media accounts focus on well-known organizations. The lesser known organizations continue to be unknown, while the already-known organizations become even more prominent. It is difficult to break this cycle of attention.

Instead of breaking the cycle, local emergency managers should take advantage of these networks. Rather than lamenting the prominence of certain

Figure 1 | Brazos County Network

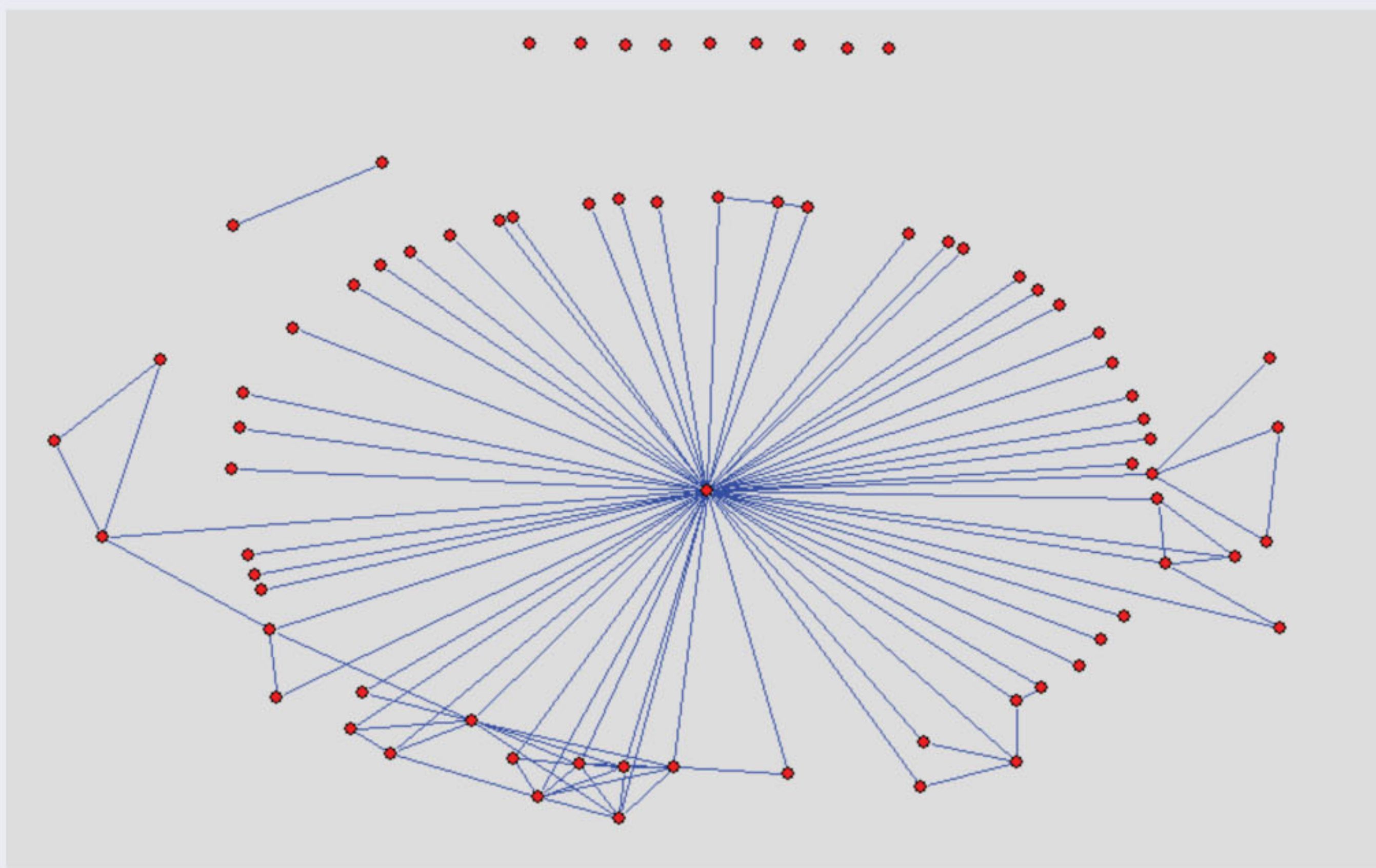


Table 2 | Number of Media Mentions by Organization in Shreveport

Organization	Number of Media Mentions
FEMA (within DHS)	83
Shreveport Charity Hospital	35
Louisiana State University	33
Louisiana National Guard	25
U.S. Department of Homeland Security	24
Louisiana Health Science Center	23
American Red Cross	16
All Others (n=89)	<11

organizations, local emergency managers need to partner with prominent organizations. For example, the Brazos County Office of Emergency Management has created a station for a university representative within the Emergency Operating Center (EOC). This is full-time office space (though not occupied full-time) rather than an invitation to participate only while the EOC is active.

Integration of the prominent organization places the LEMOs closer to organizations the media are most likely to cover. Local leaders hope the integration of university officials will bring local government offices closer to the prominent organization, increase its prominence and improve its effectiveness in preparing for and responding to emergencies.

Justification for incorporating the university official into the EOC is not obvious. If one looks at emergency management plans for the community, university officials are present but by no means dominant. They would not likely be the first official one would consider opening an office for within the EOC itself. However, the prominence of the university makes the official an attractive component for the EOC.

Shreveport officials do not face quite the same degree of centralization in their media-reported network, but they have taken similar steps. Recognizing the

prominence (and importance) of state officials in their emergency management operations, they have built and maintained close ties with their state liaison. This enables them to borrow some attention from state-level actors. Again, instead of trying to break into the centralized network (as seen by the media), LEMOs should piggyback on it.

Recommendation #2: Engagement

Particularly in emergencies, journalists are under time pressures. It should be no surprise that they are likely to turn to contacts they already have. Understanding deadline constraints of journalists is vital to local emergency managers breaking the vicious cycle of invisibility. LEMOs should engage these journalists before a crisis. This can be accomplished in two ways.

First, it is essential that emergency managers meet with local journalists frequently—before emergencies. During an emergency, local emergency managers do not have time to talk to journalists, and journalists do not have time to dig for information.

If the local emergency management office has a well-established relationship with the media, they will be able to smoothly feed accurate information to journalists. Journalists will already have some of the basic information (the “who” and “why” of many of the local emergency

management activities) and only need to supplement basic information with event-specific news.

Clearly, all relevant actors should already know who you are. While journalists are not emergency management officials per se, they too should be people with whom you are familiar. If they have a prior relationship with you, they are more likely to turn to you for information during a crisis. If they are not familiar with you, who knows where they will turn?

Furthermore, if you work with them over time, especially outside the context of active emergencies, you can help educate them about emergency management. As a result, they may be much less likely to spread disinformation or misinterpret information they are given.

Cultivating contacts is vital. If you can be at a top source for general matters related to community emergency issues, you are much more likely to be the person they call for information during an event—rather than another person they know who may have a tenuous connection to the incident.

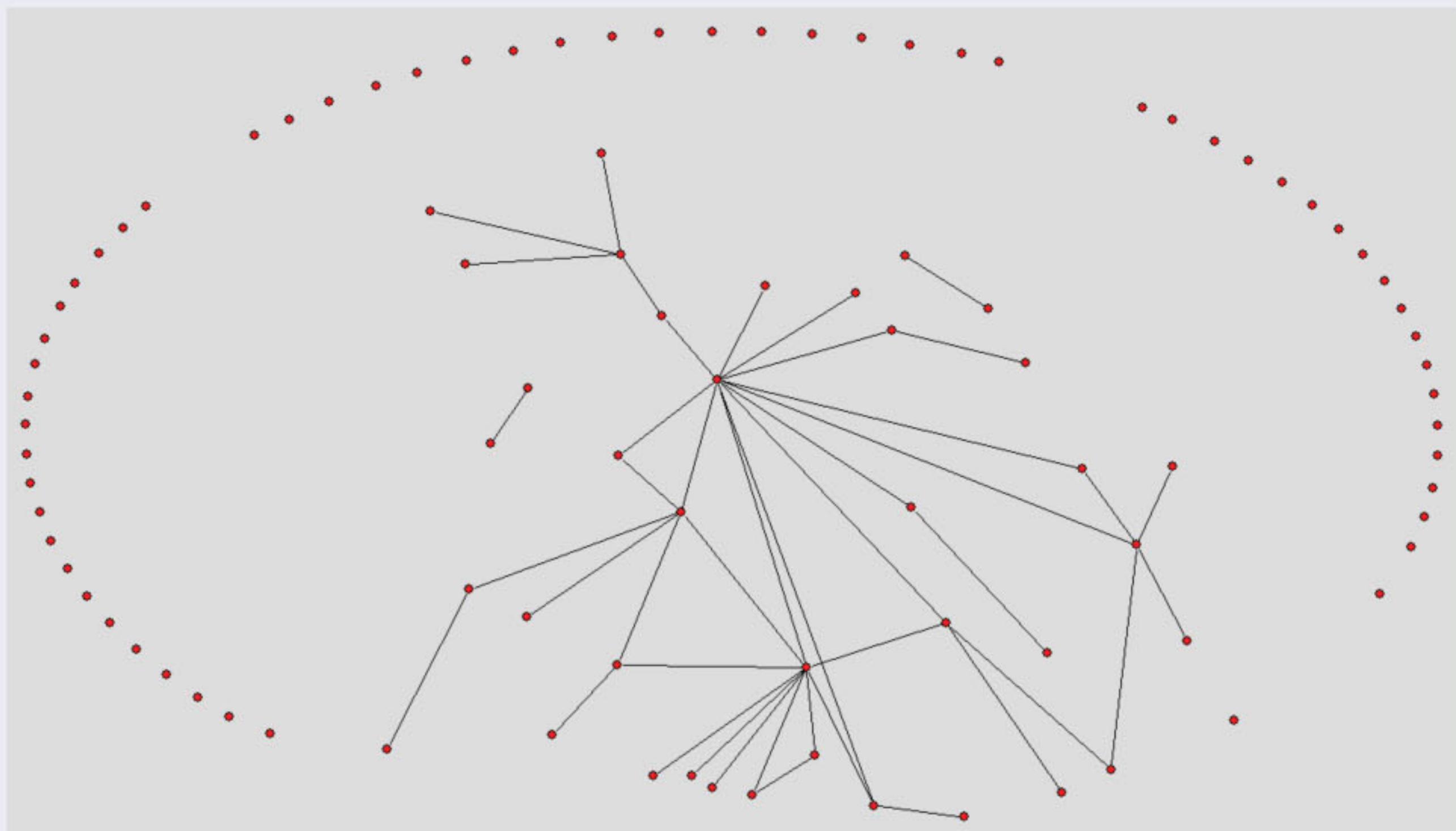
Second, LEMOs can make it easier for journalists to cover their activities. One way to do this is to have

designated media representatives. Journalists will know to turn to the designated contact person and can build a relationship during the times of without emergencies. A media contact, if that contact lacks the authority of the actual emergency manager, can build the relationships as well. However, this is an expensive strategy for smaller organizations that may not have an entire full-time employee to spare for these activities. You could assign a person to this task, but recognize that some part of their

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Figure 2 | Shreveport Network



time will be away from the primary responsibilities and focused on media relations.

However, a part-time media representative may not be able to build the close relationships you need to ensure accurate coverage. This part-time strategy has been quite common in medium-sized communities. It can work, but you really must be careful that you don't end up with the worst of all worlds: an employee distracted from core responsibilities that still fails to develop the necessary rapport with local journalists.

These are important lessons for emergency managers, but not exclusively for emergency managers. There is every reason to believe that the long shadow cast by central institutions in these communities blocks out attention to other local agencies, including local welfare, law enforcement, and nonprofit agencies.

A less-costly alternative is to work with journalists to develop efficient forms for emergency information. Journalists working under time pressures, including during emergency situations, often work from article templates. They have the basic format for their articles already written and they fill in the blanks with the specific information of events. You can work with these journalists before an event to identify information they will need.

This reduces information that journalist won't (or won't know how to) use and speeds coverage of LEMOs. If you can focus on the key information the journalists

need, they are more likely to use your information. And more importantly, they are more likely to get that information correct. It is when you carpet bomb the media with information that you increase the likelihood that the media will get something—maybe something vital—wrong.

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The keys to productive relationships with the media are familiarity and engagement. Hopefully, these strategies will help local public organizations of various kinds get the attention they need to serve the public and to receive the credit they richly deserve.

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