

Communication Challenges After the Hurricane

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Many survivors of Hurricane Katrina who tried to call for rescue or medical assistance found that their cell phones had gone dead, in part because commercial cellular systems were not designed to be highly reliable.

This is not surprising. Making it more reliable would boost the costs of cellular service without increasing profits. Nothing can prevent disasters from bringing systems down, but companies can choose to have two hours of power backup or 20 hours. At the moment, money spent on the latter must come out of profits.

If directed by Congress, the Federal Communications Commission could improve this situation. Today carriers compete to cut costs but not to improve dependability. The FCC could produce annual reports for consumers on the dependability and security of cellular systems.

Carriers who invest in dependability then could be rewarded by a corresponding increase in demand for their services.

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