

A Tornado of Traffic at Kansas.com

The *Wichita Eagle's* blanket coverage of the May 4 tornado that killed 12 people and virtually wiped out the town of Greensburg, Kan., sent its web traffic rocketing to record levels and sent a message to the *Eagle* newsroom on the power of the online medium.

"We have high aspirations for Kansas.com, but I couldn't have imagined the number of people who are turning to us for news," wrote *Eagle* editor **Sherry Chisenhall** in an editor's blog posting May 11.

The *Eagle* provided 42 pages of coverage and hundreds of web updates in the 10 days following the Greensburg tornado, updating nearly around the clock after the storm hit about 9:30 p.m.

On a typical weekday, Kansas.com gets about 260,000 page views from 37,000 unique visitors.

The Greensburg tornado struck on a Friday night. By the following Monday, May 7, page views had soared to 5.76 million from 371,000 different visitors. The traffic peaked May 9 – when President Bush visited Greensburg – with 9.85 million page views by 710,000 unique visitors.

"The past week has made abundantly clear to us the power of the internet to inform and connect people," wrote **Nick Jungman**, senior editor for interactive, in a May 11 blog posting. "The devastation in Greensburg – and the concern and curiosity it sparked across the world – sent traffic on Kansas.com soaring."

The total weekday traffic following the tornado saw 42 million page views by 2.8 million different users, reported Jungman. Ninety-five percent of that traffic was concentrated in the online photo galleries.

The small city of Greensburg, with a pre-tornado population of about 1,400, sits 110 miles from Wichita. The *Eagle* is the largest newspaper in Kansas and the largest newspaper anywhere close to Greensburg.

"Kansans are prepared for tornadoes for the most part," said Chisenhall in an interview. "For the numbers of tornados that happen here, there really aren't a huge number of fatalities."

"When we started hearing the number of fatalities from this storm, it kicked our news coverage up to a whole other level."

The *Eagle's* coverage included breaking news stories, photo pages in print and galleries online, video, editors' blog posts, and message boards to help people locate friends and family members. Stories wrapped up breaking news, told survivors' harrowing stories about riding out the storm, recounted life in Greensburg before the disaster and examined the personal treasures that survivors were determined to locate in the aftermath.

Reporter **Tim Potter**, the *Eagle's* first staffer on the scene, wrote a first-person account of covering his third major tornado. The morning after the tornado, the paper hired a helicopter and sent photographer **Jaime Oppenheimer** airborne to capture video and photos of the devastation.

Eagle photographs appeared around the world, including on the front page of *USA Today*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* websites.

"Covering the Greensburg tornado has been something of a coming-of-age moment for Kansas.com," wrote Chisenhall in her blog post. "The newsroom staff here has done a spectacular job of covering a national news story as a 24/7 news organization, not 'just' a morning newspaper."

"Despite difficult financial times for newspapers right now, the newsroom team's response to the tornado – and readers' response to our printed and online news coverage – reminds us here that there's a much-needed public service we must provide in times of great need, and we can now meet that need any time of day or night."

The internet work was even more impressive given that the *Eagle* staff is still learning new web publishing tools.



Kansas.com moved off of the Knight Ridder Digital publishing platform in March and onto new servers and a new publishing system with McClatchy Interactive.

At one point, tornado traffic on Kansas.com overwhelmed McClatchy Interactive's web-traffic tracking and temporarily disabled the traffic reporting for other McClatchy websites.

Greensburg had fewer than 100 subscribers to the print edition of the paper said **Lou Heldman**, *Eagle* publisher.

The paper has stopped home delivery because "there are no homes there anymore."