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The Heart of Reuters (A)

When the World Falls Apart

No one has a plan for what to do when the world falls apart.

The 1,200 employees of Reuters America located in 3 Times Square had a clear view of the World Trade Center from windows above the 22nd floor of its brand new building. After 8:45 a.m. on September 11, people from all over the building flocked to those windows to confirm that an airplane had hit one of the WTC buildings. The thick stream of smoke and the discernible fire made it clear that the rumors were true. It was not until the second plane hit that disbelief, uncertainty, and fear fully struck 3 Times Square.

Pandemonium reigned in 3 Times Square for the first hour or two after the attacks. Some employees stayed by the windows to watch the towers burn. Some left for home immediately. Others went out to the streets, but went nowhere in particular. Some made phone calls to loved ones, or to people they knew in the World Trade Center. Some got on the Internet to follow the news reports. And some retreated to offices or conference rooms.

Beyond these individual responses, Reuters as an organization had to respond. Not only did it have a data center in the World Trade Center, it had four other facilities in New York City, employees at conferences and meetings around the city, employees in Washington, where another plane hit the Pentagon, employees near the Sears Tower in Chicago, employees traveling on planes all around the country and the world, and countless customers who would be affected in greater or lesser degrees. How many employees and customers might be affected? How would they know where to look for which ones? Who should be responsible for tracking which ones? How many of them were in places where they could be contacted? What would Reuters do if any of them turned up missing or dead? Reuters was a global company—what should the extent of its search and rescue efforts be?

The following account is a reconstruction of Reuters responses immediately following the events of September 11, 2001. This description is the product of interviews with 30 individuals from Reuters America conducted between October 19 and November 8.

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