

“It was Only a Sign Error”

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According to an article titled “Corps of Engineers goofs on anti-flooding mapping” in the November 18, 2007, issue of the *Springfield Republican*, on June 20, 2007, the Army Corps of Engineers released flood-risk maps for parts of New Orleans that claimed that the drainage canals would reduce flooding during a major storm by 5.5 feet. However, in a report dated November 7, the 5.5 feet estimate was changed to 6 inches: ‘We’ve made some corrections,’ the engineer Ed Link, told reporters on Friday. Link said mistakes were made in the calculations for two sub-basins that include Lakeview and nearby neighborhoods. In one, a minus sign was used instead of a plus sign.”

The article also mentions that this discrepancy was buried in the appendices to the November 7 report, and came to light only when a reporter for a local New Orleans television station asked the engineer about it.

Cox adds, “There are two important points here. First, sign errors can have serious consequences; and second, quantitative literacy is important for everyone, including journalists.”

This appeared in Vol. 39, NO. 2, March 2008 THE COLLEGE MATHEMATICS JOURNAL