

Community Broadcasting 2010 new inroads into an old frontier.

Natural disasters have not really changed that much in Australia. What has changed are the population densities and the nature of community involvement in these phenomena.

Droughts, floods, and Cyclone are all a parts of Australian everyday life, and so are bushfires. 1983 and 2009 were tragic reminders in Victoria, in January 2003 Canberra and the South West Slopes of NSW were devastated with bushfires. Sydney was encircled with bushfires in 2002.

Floods have always been endemic in Australia, Gundagai was wiped out in 1852, killing one third of the inhabitants. How many floods have we seen in the last 10 years?

All of northern Australia falls within the arc of tropical cyclones; they are frequent, devastating, and relentless. The biggest natural disaster in Australia was cyclone Mahina in 1899, 400 people were killed on Cape York. Interesting point to note, the average diameter of a cyclone is 50-120km usually, the diameter of Hurricane Katrina was 640km.

Radio has always been the main tool for informing the community of the situation, and the information service the safety for communities under threat. By its nature, radio is immediate, portable, passive and highly adaptable.

Up to this point in time, Community radio has performed admirably its modest role in the articulation of community welfare during locally crisis. The main functions for emergency broadcasting have been broadcast on Public Radio (ABC). Community radio is one of the most valuable but ironically most under utilised tools in disaster information response. Not just in Australia but globally.

During the 2009 Victorian Bushfires this changed significantly.

The scale, scope and voracity of the February 2009 fires completely overwhelmed information dissemination of the public and commercial sectors, and the emergency services. There were so many fires moving and changing so quickly across so many different areas that the information systems could not keep up to date with the crisis.

So we had hundreds of fires burning across the state, tens of thousands of people relying on radio as the primary source of information. The ABC Victorian bushfires reports went on for up to 20 minutes at a time – with an advancing fire front, minutes are vital to saving lives. At one stage the Kinglake-Murrindindi fire travelled 50 km in 15 minutes.

Add to this the perplexing situation of Public and Commercial Radio presenters putting to air talk-back radio calls, from distressed and frequently disorientated people fleeing the fires, to add to the general confusion, giving well intentioned but wrong information about what was going on. Then the

wind changed direction, and what was unthinkable, became worse. Transmission systems started to break down, through infrastructure damage, I visited the area to get a first hand look in preparation for the CBAA submission to the Royal Commission, and the first thing I noticed was all the power lines where burnt out.

Community Radio has never figured as a major player across the scope of emergency broadcasting, individual stations certainly have played a major role in their local communities, CBAA member stations 3PVR 3GCR and 3UGE played a huge part in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires. Community radio played a vital part in the 2003 fires in The Snowy Mountains area 2 TVR informing the local communities of immediate danger.

This calls into question the role of community radio in emergency broadcasting and what we as a sector need to examine are the ethical imperatives:

- Are we obliged to be emergency broadcasters?
- Are we capable?
- Do we want to?

We are obliged on some level to pass on information to our communities. What we do will depend on the members of each station to decide. To be fully fledged and accredited emergency broadcasters is a lengthy process. It's certainly a worthwhile and essential service, but not everyone is 'in' community radio to be community wardens, it's a hobby for a lot of people (and fair enough). Community radio is also a vehicle for celebration of local culture and pride. If we are not going to be fully fledged emergency broadcasters, I think we are obliged to act as information conduits from agencies that are set up just for this purpose. We are completely obliged under the BSA 1992 to give emergency services access to our facilities in times of extreme crisis. Some level of involvement from stations in natural disaster prone areas really is vital. The capability is not just about people though, it's also about infrastructure. In times of extreme weather, flood, or fire, power and communications are frequently the first to go. Technical contingencies must be available (generators and satellite internet). If there is a fire or flood in your area, where do you need to be? In the station or at home helping your family? Community radio is operated by volunteers who are impacted by the disasters as much as their local communities.

There other things to consider: what is coming in the short and mid term future? More of the same and possibly worse. I know communities in some areas are very apprehensive especially if they have not had experienced a significant bushfire event for some years, the continuing drought has created a lot of ground fuel. Hotter weather extremes, lack of rain, and high winds will be like a blow torch on the land.

Our sector needs to look at the mid and long term priorities and what we need to do to ensure safety for our communities, how we can work together to develop strategies and build networks and implement them across the country to support communities facing disasters.

The CBAA as the peak body for the sector is well placed to investigate, assess, and recommend strategies and to develop policies for our involvement in emergency broadcasting and also to look at ways to support stations and communities that go through this. The CBAA also is in a good position to lobby government and also make suitable representation for funding for projects to implement emergency broadcasting protocols. It's immediately clear that community radio is going to be playing a more crucial role in this. Local people with real-time on-the-ground information and local knowledge will be vital in the short and mid term future.

Metropolitan stations even though they are not in the fire front are still part of the process, fires surrounded Sydney in 2002, in 1996 the Dandenong ranges in Melbourne went up, Adelaide was surrounded by fires to the east and north. If there was a massive bushfire in Melbourne again in the Dandenong's, as bad as the 2009 fires, I could foresee massive damage to the broadcast equipment that most stations have located on Mt. Dandenong. There are issues for us to think about.

I wanted to add a personal perspective to this, the personal stories are the narrative of reality. Six People I know died in the Victorian bushfires. One reasonably close friend burned to death in her car with her two dogs trying to escape from Strathewen, I tried to call her on the day of the fires, but couldn't get through, I ended up calling her mother (who I didn't really know) the next day. She eventually told me what had happened, all I could think about was how the last minutes of her life must have been, trapped in the car with her dogs with the hell-fire bearing down, she must have died in complete terror. It has distressed me greatly. People around me told me to try not to think about it, but ironically that's all I could think about for a long time.