



**SUBMISSION BY COMMERCIAL RADIO AUSTRALIA**

**Capacity of Communication Networks and Emergency Warning  
Systems to Deal with Emergencies and Natural Disasters**

**Inquiry by the Senate Environment and Communications  
References Committee**

**21 April 2011**

## **SUBMISSION BY COMMERCIAL RADIO AUSTRALIA**

### **1. Introduction**

Commercial Radio Australia (**CRA**) welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Senate Inquiry relating to the capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters.

CRA is the peak national industry body for Australian commercial radio stations. CRA has 260 members and represents approximately 99% of the commercial radio broadcasting industry in Australia.

The commercial radio industry is keen to offer as much assistance as possible in times of emergency and recognizes its responsibilities as one of the nation's major information sources during crises.

Broadcast media is the most effective means by which emergency service organisations communicate with the public when critical events occur. Commercial radio plays a particularly important role, as 80% of Australians listen to commercial radio. The local commercial radio stations therefore play a critical role in the dissemination of information to the local community in times of emergency.

We set out below a brief outline of the regulation and agreements which detail the way in which commercial radio assists in emergencies, together with examples from recent emergencies of the way in which this operates in practice. We also outline the challenges that stations have faced in dealing with the recent emergencies.

### **2. Regulatory framework**

#### ***Commercial Radio Codes of Practice***

The commercial radio industry is heavily regulated by the Federal Government. As part of this regulation, the Australian Communications and Media Authority requires commercial radio stations to adhere to the *Commercial Radio Codes of Practice*.

Code of Practice 8 sets out commercial radio broadcasters' obligations in relation to the broadcast of emergency information. Specifically:

*A licensee will, in consultation with appropriate emergency and essential service organizations, implement a set of internal procedures to enable the timely and accurate broadcast of warnings and information supplied by such organizations relating to an existing or threatened emergency.*

All commercial radio stations are bound by this Code.

### ***Memoranda of Understanding***

As a result of the recommendations of the Victorian Royal Commission into the “black Saturday” fires in Victoria in 2009, the Victorian Government approached the commercial radio industry in Victoria to enter into a Memorandum of Understanding (**MoU**) for the broadcast of emergency information. Commercial radio broadcasters agreed to enter into an MoU which complements Code 8 and also sets out useful processes governing the communication of information between the broadcasters and the emergency service organisations.

The commercial radio industry has now entered into MoUs in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, and an MoU is currently being negotiated in Tasmania. Western Australia is the only State that does not have an MoU either in place or under negotiation. The commercial radio industry has offered to enter discussions regarding an MoU with the government of Western Australia. Western Australia has not yet taken up this offer, although it has indicated that it will do so at some point in the future.

The events of early 2011 - floods in Victoria and Queensland, cyclone Yasi and the bush fires in Western Australia - all highlight the importance of having an emergency communication process that is as effective as possible. The MoUs assist in achieving this, by setting out communication processes and protocols for a collaborative approach to the broadcast of emergency information.

### **3. Effectiveness of commercial radio before and during emergencies**

Of Commercial Radio Australia’s 260 member stations, 220 are based in regional and rural areas. These stations strive to achieve community engagement through a focus on local issues. Accordingly, the industry is very well placed to understand the needs of local communities and to communicate effectively with them during emergencies.

### ***Warnings of threat***

Many commercial radio stations begin preparing for emergencies and liaising with local services well in advance of the events.

Examples:

- River949, a commercial radio station licensed to broadcast in the Ipswich region of Queensland, made contact with the local SES in October 2010, following long range weather predictions that indicated a major weather event over the Christmas/ New Year period. In anticipation of the flooding, River949 arranged a full schedule of announcements – at no charge – seeking additional volunteers for the SES. This resulted in over 30 new SES members signing up; not only in Ipswich but throughout River949’s coverage area (Lockyer Valley, Somerset and Scenic Rim Shires, with

fortuitous signal in Toowoomba and a substantial portion of Brisbane's Western and Southern Suburbs).

- In November 2010, River949 negotiated with a large electrical retailer to sell battery operated radios to the public for ten dollars each, highlighting the fact that, with a predicted major weather event and possible loss of power, a portable radio would give listeners a communication device. A community service campaign (also provided at no-charge) alerted listeners to this offer.
- In Victoria, as a result of the MoU, the local radio stations have continuous contact with emergency services, through the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner. The Office is in regular contact with our members, seeking feedback before and after the annual fire season, and updating contact station details to ensure the prompt communication of information during emergencies. The industry is currently working with the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner to establish further mechanisms to ensure that adequate warnings are provided.
- Triple M, in Brisbane, devoted considerable air time before the floods to weather related news stories (for example, the Weather Bureau predicted 4 cyclones, and the potential for heavy rainfall). Coverage was also given to warnings from Lord Mayor Campbell Newman about the likelihood of a flood of a scale similar to that of 1974.

### ***Imminent warnings and updates during emergencies***

Almost all commercial radio stations break from their normal programming immediately preceding and during emergencies, to provide the best possible information service. Networked programming is usually discarded, in favour of continuous live and local programming.

The reporting includes both official forecasts and reports from local listeners. During the recent events in Queensland, the latter were frequently more accurate and current than the former.

As the below examples show, many local stations go to extraordinary lengths to provide information and to continue broadcasting through emergencies.

Examples:

- During Cyclone Yasi, 4TO in Townsville continued to broadcast despite being located in an area where storm surge was predicted (Woolcock Street). When the evacuation order was given a skeleton staff moved to a makeshift home studio in Kirwan. They continued to broadcast throughout the night, until they were able to return to Woolcock Street at 11.00am the next day, sharing phone calls and SMS messages from locals,

and broadcasting updates from the Premier and the Member for Thuringowa, Craig Wallace. Mr Wallace MP reported the following in Parliament:

*I commend all the staff, reporters, editors at the Townsville Bulletin and our local radio station 4TO. They warned us constantly of the dangers and then broadcast right through the cyclone so that we knew what was going on. They were our only link to the outside world. In the lead up to the cyclone, the Bully and 4TO made a courageous decision to keep broadcasting.*

*That's no mean feat. You see, 4TO is in Woolcock Street and it was going to go under if we'd had the big storm surge the bureau was predicting.*

*When the evacuation order was given, they still didn't give up and moved into a makeshift home studio in Kirwan drawing on the resources of panel operators from Southern Cross media's hub on the Gold Coast.*

*Once that connection was established via a tie line to Daniel the manager's home – they were in business. There, they bunkered down and prepared for the worst - Daniel, Steve Price, Wayde, Blair, Minty from home with his kids, 2 cats, a cattle dog, family and friends.*

*They broadcast all through that dark night and shared phone calls and SMS messages from locals who were also bunkered down in their homes, in bathrooms, hallways and cupboards right across the north from Hinchinbrook to Bowen.*

- On 10 January 2011, River949 broadcast regular BOM bulletins indicating rain and flash flooding. The official forecasts and the radar screen did not at that stage show exceptional weather for Toowoomba. However, as a result of local listener calls, River949 was able to report on rising water at Withcott, flash flooding in Toowoomba and rising water over the Warrego Highway. River 949 broke from its normal programming and turned the station format over to flood information, warnings and updates at 4pm, as the weather warnings predicted flooding. The station reported on calls from listeners within its fortuitous signal area, who provided road closure information and local updates. By 7pm that evening, River949's 70 phone lines were fully occupied.
- River949 was isolated by flood waters for around five days during the disaster events in January 2011. During this period it maintained a 24 hour service, operating with five people who slept at the station.
- B105 and Triple M went live and local from Tuesday 11 January to Friday 14 January, with news on the half hour and updates every 15 minutes. All normal programming was stopped and focus was purely on providing flood related information. Its live programming and coverage was extended to 24 hours. Skeleton staff remained at the station from Tuesday to Friday, the news department was manned 24 hours, with news staff and other key staff not returning to their families and homes for the entire week. . Extra journalists were flown up from Sydney and Melbourne to provide support.
- The B105 and Triple M updates focussed on delivering vital information and news at regular intervals. This meant that listeners could 'appointment set' to get the latest

information, rather than having to wait for coverage at an unknown time. The segments were broken up into news (river levels, dam releases, death toll) and practical information, including evacuation points, phone contacts and emergency health advice. Listeners reported losing power in their apartments and homes, then going and sitting in their cars in the dark and hearing a updates on B105 or Triple M. Listeners were also directed to the Triple M and B105 websites in order to access a comprehensive rundown of emergency information as well as a checklist for volunteers.

- Listeners called the newsrooms at B105 and Triple M to report crises in their neighbourhood. B105 and Triple M were the first to report that the Corso had broken its banks at Yeronga. Many callers reported they were having trouble reaching the SES on their hotline, so Triple M and B105 was able to provide vital information to these people. As the flood crisis continued, distraught listeners rang the newsroom, often just needing to release some emotion, or hear a human voice.
- Breeze FM and Rebel FM broadcast in affected areas of Queensland provided coverage that included:
  - local interviews with the SES, shire councillors and mayors in affected towns, before, during and after the events;
  - broadcast of cyclone and local weather warnings and 4BC/2UE state news bulletins on a 24 hours a day across the period; and
  - Rebel FM (10 regional transmitters on North /West Queensland feeds only) breaking from normal music network programming to network 4BC for three hours (9am-12pm) for the day before, during and after Cyclone Yasi.
- The Brisbane digital station *4TAB(2)* renamed itself *4TABhelp* during the floods and provided a 'loop' service with points of contact, phone and web addresses relevant to those affected by the floods.
- 4BC suspended all regular programme content on the evening of 10 January, when the floods hit Toowoomba, and broadcast continuous, comprehensive emergency coverage. 4BC management also provided additional producing resources to all programs, to deal with the information flowing into the station. It continued this coverage until Monday 17 January.
- 4BC broadcast extensive coverage of Cyclone Yasi. Programs airing on Wednesday 2 February and Thursday 3 February concentrated heavily on the impending and actual impact of Cyclone Yasi. In order to continue 4BC cyclone coverage, local programming was continued after midnight (rather than the normal networked feed of Sydney program content from midnight to 5am).
- 4BH broadcast extensive coverage of the floods, replacing all automated programming with live broadcasts, in order to keep the information accurate and up to date. Additional

staff worked alongside regular presenters to deal with the increase in information flow. Staff who were unable to make it into the studio due to flooding provided reports from their home areas.

- In order to have extra staffing resources during the floods, 4BC provided accommodation nearby for staff members affected by the floods and for those who, due to the long hours worked, required closer lodgings to rest than their own home. Staff involved in the continuous flood coverage over this period included on-air presenters, producers, casual announcers, technicians, and promotion and marketing staff members, all of whom volunteered to work long and irregular hours to ensure that 4BC coverage was comprehensive and delivered the up-to-the-minute news and information to all listeners.
- 4KZ in Cairns broadcast non-stop emergency information throughout the night during Cyclone Yasi, as well as regular updates during the lead-up to the event. A letter published on 12 February 2011 in the Cairns Weekend Post read as follows:

*Thanks must go to the 4KZ radio announcers, Al Kirton and Greg Vuleta for their comprehensive and informative coverage in the days leading up to Cyclone Yasi approaching the coast, and our town. I thought that during the night these men had to go home and bunker down like the rest of us, but no, all through that dreadful night they remained with us, calmly giving updates and playing great music. It was comforting to know they were out there, putting their own lives at risk for our community.*

### **Assistance after the crises**

- On Friday at 9.00am, B105 advised listeners to call if help was needed or if they could offer assistance to others. B105 then matched up people who could help each other. B105 attended all the rally points for the clean-up, helping in handing out water, sunscreen and insect repellent to volunteers.
- In the aftermath of the floods, Triple M's coverage focussed on assisting the recovery with practical steps. For example, the breakfast show encouraged the building industry to donate a week's worth of work.
- After the cyclone passed and the all-clear was given, 4BC News Director Scott Mayman travelled to North Queensland and worked with staff at 4KZ to help with recovery/clean up information. He also reported from the scene, speaking with those affected by the cyclone, broadcasting local road information as well as helping to get the message out about the urgent needs of locals affected by the cyclone.

### **Engagement with communities**

Commercial radio stations in disaster affected areas use new media, as well as traditional media, to communicate with local communities. Evidence shows a significant increase in

the numbers of people listening to radio via online devices during the emergencies. This helps to demonstrate the increased versatility of radio afforded by new technologies.

It is probably safe to assume that the numbers of people listening to traditional radio increased in similar proportions, but that would be harder to measure.

Examples:

- From 2.30pm on 10 January 2011 until 16 January 2011, River949 took over 9,000 calls on its general office number and studio lines, received 700 text messages and fielded over 24,000 hits on its web site. It channeled vital information on to a dedicated River949 flood “face book” site which posted over 650 messages.
- The number of people streaming broadcasts of 4TO in Townsville increased almost threefold from 7048 in January 2011 to 19,840 in February 2011, when Cyclone Yasi and flooding hit the area.
- The number of people streaming broadcasts of SEA Cairns increased from 2028 in December 2010 (no emergency events), to 8319 in January 2011 (flooding) to 10,808 in February 2011 (Cyclone Yasi and flooding).
- 4BC constantly updated its website to mirror the information broadcast on-air. The Online Content Manager, Simon Dodson, worked non-stop over this period to ensure that information was refreshed at a regular basis. At the height of the flooding, Simon worked continuously over a 48 hour period, only taking short breaks to catch some sleep on a couch just outside his office.
- The 4BC website traffic statistics for January show traffic increasing to 80% above normal, with a 183% increase in unique browsers. On 12 January, 4BC recorded a single day peak of 129,777 hits within a 24 hour period.
- B105 set its highest ever record for unique browsers and page impressions, with flood related content that generated 1,216,993 hits.

#### **4. Challenges**

##### ***Exchange of information***

The commercial radio industry continues to encounter some difficulty in obtaining prompt and adequate information from emergency services. While to some extent this is to be expected, given the circumstances in which organisations are operating during these events, it is nevertheless important to create communication lines that are as efficient as possible.



The introduction of the MoUs has greatly assisted in creating formalized communication lines, as well as ensuring that contact details of both the radio stations and the emergency services are current and appropriate.

However, the events in Queensland demonstrated that some challenges remain. Emergency service providers appeared on occasion to be unaware of the circumstances in which stations operate during these events, and the most helpful way in which information might be conveyed.

It also proved difficult for stations to obtain accurate information from the authorities, relating to weather forecasts, relief services, evacuation centres and similar.

Many of the below examples no doubt reflect the immense pressure that the emergency services themselves were under, but these issues should nevertheless be addressed.

Examples:

- River 949 was operating with 5 staff, sleeping at the station. These staff were responsible for producing on-air content and taking a huge volume of calls. In these circumstances, telephone calls from authorities – rather than email updates – would have been helpful, as it was extremely difficult for the station to keep track of all faxes and emails coming into the station during this period.
- In some areas, there appeared to be a lack of communication from a wide range of organisations. Many stations were forced to rely on listeners to provide critical local information.
- In some areas, local spokespersons for the various emergency service authorities did not appear to have been appointed. Our members reported that the Lockyer Valley Council and the Scenic Rim Shire had appointed such people to deal with enquiries, and in those areas it proved much easier to obtain emergency information for broadcast.
- Some stations found it difficult to get official responses from authorities. Stations received thousands of calls from listeners covering a wide range of issues, including rising flood water, road closures and bridge washouts, rumours regarding dam breaching, lack of power, medical assistance, food shortages, evacuation centres, clean-up assistance, accommodation issues and offers of assistance in services and kind. In the face of such enquiries, limited official information was available from the SES, Councils, Energex and the Police. Nevertheless, there were some reliable and accessible sources of information – in particular, one station mentioned that the Queensland Police *facebook* page was invaluable in providing up to date information.
- Listeners also reported difficulties in obtaining responses from “official” sources. River 949 received many calls saying that the given call centre number (3810 6666) for the

Ipswich City Council was not being answered. Many listeners also called in to say that 000 and the SES numbers were not being answered.

- River949 reported that, even as the flood waters rose, despite making many calls to a variety of local officers, they could not advise listeners of designated evacuation centres. Calls requesting assistance from distressed residents started to come into the station very early on the Tuesday morning and it was not until some three or four hours later that the station was able to provide details of the evacuation centres.
- On Tuesday 11 January, 4BC only became aware that the alert siren was being used by listening to the ABC. No representative from Emergency Management Queensland (EMQ) had contacted 4BC to let it know that the alert siren should be played. 4BC contacted EMQ, who said that 4BC should play the alert. However, it gave no instructions as to how often or when the alert should be played.
- 4BC encountered contradictory advice later in the week, when the EMQ said that alert sirens should be broadcast, whereas the Bureau of Meteorology informed 4BC that alert sirens should not be broadcast.
- Triple M and B105 report that the Police Media *Facebook* page was an invaluable source of information. However, when seeking information they encountered a lack of clarity as to the identity of the 'lead agency'- Police or Emergency Management Queensland.

### ***Promotion of commercial radio as a source of information***

Following the Queensland floods and cyclone, stations received many reports from listeners who were concerned that emergency service organisations, local authorities and members of parliament were failing to promote commercial radio as a source of information.

It is important that the emergency services representatives and politicians promote the role of commercial radio and acknowledge its position as an official emergency broadcaster, in order to maximize awareness of commercial radio as an information source.

During the floods there were some instances where the public was directed only to the ABC and no mention was made of commercial radio broadcasts. This could lead to a lack of public awareness of the sources of emergency information, particularly in circumstances where other media are unable to continue to broadcast locally and the commercial stations are one of few remaining sources of emergency information (as happened during the cyclones in Townsville and Cairns).

For example:

- At a press conference at 9am 2 February at EMQ Kedron Headquarters, Premier Anna Bligh stated that the ABC is the Queensland official emergency services broadcaster. No

mention was made of commercial broadcasters, even though the Queensland has an official MoU with the commercial radio industry, and 4BC had a journalist (Natalie Bochenski) permanently stationed at EMQ Kedron reporting to 4KZ and 4AM, which were the local commercial radio stations in the cyclone area.

- Councillor Shayne Sutton, Brisbane City Council Opposition Leader, Spokesperson for Infrastructure and Councillor for Morningside sent an email on 11 January 2011, advising people to listen to ABC radio for the most up to date information. No mention was made of commercial radio. Councillor Sutton remedied this oversight in her next communication.

The commercial broadcasters went to great lengths to provide top level emergency service information to listeners – as is demonstrated by the above examples. It is vital that communities are informed of the commercial radio broadcasting services, as well as the ABC's services. This provides communities with the best possible chance of hearing important information.

## **5. Recommendations**

The commercial radio industry makes the following suggestions, which might help to improve the efficiency of communication before and during emergencies.

- (i) Commercial radio's role should be highlighted to all stakeholders as a primary source of critical information before, during and after disaster events.
- (ii) Emergency service stakeholders and radio stations should have up to date contact lists, allowing each to contact the other in times of emergency. Where possible, information should be telephoned through to the designated station contact.
- (iii) The inclusion of a local radio station journalist within the local Command Centre during the emergency would ensure immediate and accurate reporting of information. It would also reduce the administrative burden on emergency services by automatically disseminating information to local radio.
- (iv) Emergency organisations and stakeholders should appoint specific spokespersons who are available 24 hours a day during emergencies to provide information. Regular general media conferences, whilst helpful, are inadequate and fail to take advantage of radio's unique ability to provide continuous live communication with listeners.
- (v) It would be useful if the Federal or State Governments were to run a media campaign leading into the seasons of risk in each State, highlighting the importance of purchasing battery operated radios and listening to local radio (both commercial and the ABC) during any emergency. This would help to familiarise communities

with the available information sources and might make it easier for people to stay calm and access information during a disaster event.