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21 April 2011

Mr Stephen Palethorpe
Secretary
Senate Environment and Communications References Committee
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Dear Mr Palethorpe

The capacity of communication networks and emergency warning systems to deal with emergencies and natural disasters

SBS appreciates the opportunity to provide input into this inquiry.

Communication networks which have the capacity to continue operating during emergencies and natural disasters and to effectively communicate vital information to those affected are crucial. Networks can fail due to physical damage or can fail due to congestion. Broadcasting services (one to many) are not subject to failure due to congestion, and can continue to operate during power outages, where there is otherwise no physical damage.

SBS, as a national public broadcaster which transmits multilingual radio services throughout Australia, can play an important role in communicating relevant information to multilingual audiences. This type of service is especially relevant for new migrants who need to learn about how emergency services operate in Australia, and who may not have any experience of the types of hazards and emergencies which occur in Australia.

However, while SBS transmits its radio services across Australia, its reach into regional Australia is limited by a lack of radio transmission infrastructure. Only 18 per cent of Australia's regional population can receive SBS's radio services on terrestrial radio transmitters.¹ SBS currently operates two radio transmitters in Sydney (NSW), Melbourne (Vic), Canberra (ACT), and Wollongong (NSW), and a single transmitter running the national service in Adelaide (SA), Brisbane (Qld), Darwin (NT), Hobart (Tas), Newcastle (NSW) and Perth (WA). SBS Radio is otherwise only available in locations where communities have installed and operate their own self-help transmitters.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census. Proportion of the total population of Australia excluding the capital cities: Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney.

SBS Radio's capacity to broadcast emergency information is also limited by other factors: its programming is live to air between the hours of 6am and midnight, and it is only practical to break into programming to broadcast emergency information during those hours; it runs a national service in all locations other than Sydney (including Canberra and Wollongong) and Melbourne, which affects its capacity to deliver local information.

SBS's radio services would otherwise be a very effective channel for the communication of emergency information: portable radio receivers are available, and radio services can be accessed from cars and in some cases mobile devices; SBS's transmitters (at major sites) have the capacity to operate for at least 24 hours off generators during a power outage (and for longer periods where fuel can be delivered).

New and emerging technologies are not as robust as the traditional media technologies. The base stations for mobile phones, for example, generally only have short power backups, so reliance on mobile phone networks for the communication of emergency information may be severely compromised. Services including online (and VOIP), the NBN, and landline telephones cannot be guaranteed to operate during a power outage.

It is also important that parties involved in responding to emergencies can communicate to each other. This requires uncluttered spectrum. Mobile phones, internet services and the terrestrial phone network can congest the available spectrum. It may be necessary therefore to ensure that telecommunications operators have the ability and the means to restrict calls to those parties involved in resolving emergency situations.

SBS has an important role to play in educating people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds about how to be alert to and act during and after emergencies and natural disasters. SBS is looking into the best way of doing this, given its funding constraints, with the current focus being on the provision of in-language information on the SBS Radio program websites.

Yours sincerely

Bruce Meagher
Director, Strategy and Communications



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