

THE ADEQUACY OF RADIO SERVICES IN REGIONAL AND RURAL AUSTRALIA: A SUBMISSION BY THE NEW SOUTH WALES STATE EMERGENCY SERVICE TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE RADIO INDUSTRY

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- The New South Wales State Emergency Service provides a vital service to the community when floods occur. Timely and geographically relevant dissemination of flood information is critical to maximising community safety and minimising property losses.
- The State Emergency Service has noted that there are increasing impediments, as a result of networking, to the effective broadcasting to regional parts of the state of information on floods. This has serious ramifications for the ability of communities to manage floods in the interest of personal safety and the mitigation of property damage. Strengthened procedures with regard to community service obligations will rectify the problem.
- This submission addresses the third point in the Inquiry's Terms of Reference and deals with the impact of networking in relation to local news services and community service announcements. Its specific focus is the broadcasting of emergency information on floods.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in the operation of radio broadcasting in non-metropolitan New South Wales have serious consequences in terms of public safety during emergencies. 'Networking' has caused a reduction in the level of local access to the airwaves, and local emergency managers increasingly find it impossible to disseminate vital information to the community. As a result, lives are placed at risk and efforts to reduce property damage are diminished in their effectiveness.

Nowhere is this more true than in the case of flooding. The State Emergency Service, as the legislated flood management agency in New South Wales and in other states, is seriously concerned about the impact of networking on the broadcasting of emergency information about floods.

AIM

This submission illustrates the problems caused in non-metropolitan areas during times of flooding as a result of networking. It argues that in the public interest the

community service obligation which applies to the holders of broadcasting licences should be invoked to ensure that relevant information and advice is broadcast at such times. Stronger procedures than currently exist will be needed so that the ability of people to protect themselves and their property is maximised rather than being reduced as has happened in recent years. Changes to existing legislation will be necessary to achieve this end.

THE FLOOD PROBLEM

In terms of damage to private and public property and assets, and probably also in terms of deaths and injuries, flooding is the most serious natural hazard faced by the Australian community. Thunderstorms, tropical cyclones, bush fires, earthquakes and other natural hazard agents all cost less than floods. Nationally, in fact, flooding accounts for about a third of the total dollar cost of disasters (Australian Water Resources Council, 1992).

In New South Wales alone, floods cost the community an average of \$150M annually (Emergency Management Australia, 1999a). Some individual severe flood events have cost more than this **by themselves** – the floods in the northern and western inland of the state in 1990 and 1998 and those on the Clarence and other north coast rivers in 1996 are recent cases in point.

The level of exposure to the flood threat in New South Wales is high. In terms of riverine flooding more than 100,000 urban properties are at risk of inundation in 1% Annual Exceedence Probability events (the so-called once-in-100-year floods), and to this number must be added an unknown but large number of rural properties which are similarly exposed. Even more properties are at risk, of course, in rarer and larger floods like those which affected Nyngan in 1990, Inverell in 1991 and Coffs Harbour in 1996: these events are thought to have been large enough that they would only be experienced in these towns once in 150-250 years or more, on average.

Nor is riverine flooding the only type of flood threat which exists. Many coastal communities face a serious risk of sea-water incursion when low-pressure systems lie off the coast, while some areas in the state are at risk of dam failure which has the potential to produce massive and catastrophic flooding well beyond community experiences.

Literally dozens of towns, villages and suburbs have flood liable land, and many are built entirely on floodplains. Not all have levee protection. Repeated, sometimes costly inundation is the fate of these communities and of thousands of farms. In many areas the problems of long-term isolation must also be borne.

Flooding is, however, a highly manageable threat – largely because in most environments there is time before the flood waters arrive for people to do things which will reduce their financial and other impacts. This ‘manageability’ is negated, however, if warnings and advice cannot be relayed to the community in a timely fashion and with appropriate detail as floods approach. Networking has heightened the vulnerability of rural and regional communities to the flood hazard by hampering

the transmission of warnings, information and advice: the effect has been a reduction in the ability of people to undertake activities which can mitigate the threat. A similar comment can be made about the provision of information about storms, bush fires, earthquakes and others of the natural hazards which non-metropolitan areas face.

THE USE OF RADIO DURING FLOODS

For many years, broadcast radio has been the primary means by which flood warnings, flood information and flood advice have been transmitted to communities which are about to experience flooding or are already suffering from it. While there are many other means of disseminating information prior to and during floods, none has the capacity to reach such a large number of people simultaneously and repetitively with substantial amounts of information. Doorknocking, siren and public address systems, television broadcasts and a number of relatively new high-tech methods of information delivery have their place and are utilised, but none is as central to the dissemination of urgent information under emergency conditions as is broadcast radio. Radio, because it allows speedy transmission to large audiences, has been fundamental to the broadcasting of emergency information on flooding for decades.

Over time, the means by which radio is used in disseminating this information have become relatively standardised. Flood warnings (predictions of the heights to which a river will rise by a certain time at nominated gauges on a river) are produced by the Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology, and the State Emergency Service determines what the local effects of the predicted flooding are likely to be in terms of land inundated, roads closed, property at risk and the like. The Service's assessments are based on records from past floods and from formal studies into flood impacts at different heights. Information about current and predicted heights, effects already noted and likely to occur as a flood rises, and methods of protecting property and staying safe are incorporated in Flood Bulletins which are relayed to radio stations.

Flood Bulletins are read on air by radio station announcers. There is considerable evidence that people expect to hear the bulletins and that their actions are guided by them. Even in relatively non-severe events the loss of irrigation pumps and livestock can be avoided if appropriate action is taken, and large-scale losses on the land and in residential, commercial and industrial areas in towns can be substantially mitigated in the more serious events. Likewise the fact that communities are expected to become isolated can be advertised beforehand, allowing people and businesses to stock up on essentials before roads are closed. This is vital to the maintenance of some sort of continuity of normal life and to the continuing resilience of business activity in small towns.

There is no doubt that the regular, timely broadcasting of flood information, on which communities rely, has helped to reduce the impact of flooding. Such broadcasts are particularly vital given the lack of availability of flood insurance in this country, which means there is no after-the-event means of recouping losses.

Usually, negotiations between the State Emergency Service and station staff guide the way that flood information is transmitted when flooding is expected. These negotiations mean that there is some discipline to the frequency of broadcast and to the content which is transmitted. Moreover they ensure that necessary information is broadcast verbatim rather than being truncated or editorialised with attendant risks to its integrity. The fact that local station managers and State Emergency Service regional staff meet periodically during and between events helps build up trust between them and allows each side to comprehend the other's needs – including the need for State Emergency Service Controllers to broadcast messages live to air from time to time. This builds community trust in the existence of an expert flood management agency and provides familiar, credible voices which are associated with this expertise.

The close contact between the State Emergency Service and radio station personnel has been vital to the effective transmission of emergency information during times of flooding. It is this contact, which is most readily facilitated when radio stations are locally owned and operated, which has been threatened by networking.

THE IMPACT OF NETWORKING

Networking has had a number of effects which go beyond mere changes in station ownership and control. Probably these effects were not intended, but they have had the consequence of markedly reducing the quality of the promulgation of vital emergency information. This has occurred because the bond between emergency managers and radio station personnel has been weakened. The changes apply to commercial radio and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation alike.

What has happened is that regional radio staffs have been reduced in size and influence, the new and more centralised broadcasting style replacing local input with input from afar. Prominent broadcasting personalities, once largely confined to metropolitan listening markets, are now heard throughout regional Australia. These figures bring in advertising on which owners, distant from the areas in which their stations are heard and not necessarily attuned to local needs or interested in local content, depend. Truly local input is reduced and on occasions is formally discouraged by station policy dictated from outside. A case is known in which, during the 1998 floods in the northern inland of New South Wales, the staff of a networked station were reprimanded for 'breaking in' to the network's externally-provided programming to provide flood information of a type which had always been transmitted in previous events. These staff will be more reluctant in future, and less information will be broadcast.

If breaking in is not possible, the tendency is for emergency information not to be read to air or to be read badly. An example of the potential for poor communication relates to the pronunciation of local place names. Local announcers are almost always familiar with the way these names are pronounced, but outsiders often lack this familiarity and their broadcasts are likely to be confused and confusing as a result. In turn this reduces the credibility of the information being provided. Such outcomes do nothing to help people when floods are rising and may do longer-term damage as well.

If a local station is broadcasting in networked mode, it is sometimes not clear how to contact the 'parent' station from which the signal is being fed. In some networks – particularly the ABC – this station changes frequently during a day or week, and time is wasted trying to determine who to contact with information for urgent broadcast. In some circumstances the parent station may be operated by a single person and a computer, and when this is the case the operator may be totally unable to respond appropriately to the receipt of emergency information from an unknown, distant location.

The result of the changes is that the broadcasting of information is reduced in timeliness, in quality and in volume. The informal guarantees which once existed about the regular, repetitive reading of bulletins have been eroded. It has become apparent that radio staff are sometimes unwilling to break in to networked shows, especially if they perceive the flooding to be not severe or if they fear repercussions from management. In the lesser events particularly – and these are the ones which occur most frequently, doing considerable damage – the State Emergency Service's ability to broadcast flood information has been impaired. When more severe flooding occurs the problem is less evident, suggesting that community service obligations are being met only when news-worthiness is at a high level. Since severe floods start as small ones, of course, the critical early information is likely to be missed if news-worthiness only becomes apparent some time into the event.

The new situation has been felt to varying degrees throughout regional New South Wales. A pattern has emerged whereby stations give State Emergency Service Flood Bulletins some airplay when they are broadcasting locally but provide very little service when they are broadcasting from a network base. This indicates the real reluctance to break in to networked segments. Even when breaking in does occur, the early messages which provide the opportunity for the most action before flood waters reach high levels may not be broadcast in time – which is a particular problem in upper-river and coastal areas that receive only a few hours notice that flooding will occur. It takes time for a regional station manager to understand the need, set up roster arrangements and come in to the studio to switch off the external feed and begin broadcasting.

Variations on this theme have been noted. The new situation does not occur uniformly in degree in all parts of regional New South Wales. Some station owners appear to pay more recognition to local needs and interests than others whose practice is to provide a service which is highly generic in nature. It is the more centralised services which are the greater concern from the standpoint of public safety. Where a station is locally owned and operated, the broadcasting of emergency information is at its easiest, fastest and best. A good example is provided by the locally owned and operated station 2BS (Bathurst), which operated on a continuous basis broadcasting flood information during the severe event of August 1998. Hundreds of people had to evacuate as this flood rose and in a short period of time. The success of this operation was in no small measure due to the willing cooperation of the local radio station.

It may be argued in some quarters that the rise of local community FM stations will fill the gap created by networking in commercial and ABC broadcasting. This is not

necessarily the case, however. Commercial FM stations have limited resources, restricted areas of coverage and small listening audiences. They are used by emergency managers to disseminate information and advice but can only be of limited value in this task.

With commercial stations and the ABC, the stage has been reached at certain times of day and week that radio stations are unable to disseminate messages in a timely and effective manner. Even outside these times, the quality of transmission has been impaired. Advice about public safety and the protection of property is promulgated ineffectively or not within an appropriate time frame.

A CASE STUDY OF THE RESULTS OF NETWORKING

The Moree area, in northern New South Wales, exemplifies the problems which networking has brought about. Moree is the main regional centre for a large area which is prone to frequent flooding, sometimes of a very serious nature, from the Gwydir, Mehi and Macintyre rivers. The worst flood ever experienced in the town itself and in the Moree plains area as a whole occurred in February 1955. During this event some 800 dwellings within the town were flooded from the Mehi River, as was the main business area and a very large area of rural land surrounding Moree. Extensive damage was caused to residential belongings and commercial stock, leading to serious financial losses, and large numbers of farm animals were drowned.

At this time there was no radio station in Moree. A reasonable service was provided by Radio 2NZ (Inverell) in terms of interviews with council personnel and others involved in flood management, but the service lacked immediacy and local detail of information. Noting this, a group of local business people formed a public company after the flood and successfully sought a licence to set up Radio Station 2VM (the Voice of Moree). The station began broadcasting in 1957 to a large area including Collarenebri, Mungindi, Boggabilla, Wee Waa, Narrabri, Moree and the huge tracts of farmland in the state's northern inland. The region's radio station was born, literally, as a result of flooding.

All these towns and a large number of villages in the area have serious flood problems, as do the farming areas they serve. Since its inception 2VM has provided regular weather reports and information on river heights and, when floods threaten, flood warnings and advice on what people need to do to stay safe and protect their belongings. When the State Emergency Service was formed in the area, an improved basis for the supply of flood information could be developed. Over time a strong relationship was built in which broadcasting managers and on-air staff came to know key State Emergency Service personnel, and negotiations were undertaken to ensure that appropriate information and advice were broadcast frequently, in a timely fashion, and with the necessary detail and repetition to ensure that as many people as possible were kept informed and able to act appropriately to manage the effects of flooding in their own areas.

The interaction has been 'practised' frequently, since floods are common in the north-west of the state as they are throughout non-metropolitan New South Wales.

Serious floods occurred in 1964, 1971, 1974 and 1976 on the Gwydir/Mehi system, and other parts of 2VM's listening area were badly flooded in 1956, 1971, 1976, 1983 and 1996. Flooding also occurred in other years, the last significant events at Moree and on the Boggabilla-Collarenebri reach of the Macintyre River being during the winter of 1998.

The service provided by 2VM for many years has been reduced as a result of networking which now sees the station operate as a satellite of the Sydney station 2SM for more than eighty hours a week. During these hours there is nobody at the 2VM studio in Moree. At other times it is attended but takes broadcasts from Sydney. The traditional local service, in which local announcers operate from the local studio, now accounts for less than half the total broadcast time.

While external feeds can be broken into, and on occasions have been as in 1998 when the station provided a 24-hour coverage using local announcers, problems have arisen especially when 2VM staff are out of town. Given the small local staffs of stations such as this one, this situation arises frequently especially on weekends. When it does occur, the radio medium is effectively unavailable for emergency broadcast purposes.

ENSURING IMPROVED TRANSMISSION OF INFORMATION IN THE FUTURE

The State Emergency Service does not oppose networking and it does not seek unrestricted access to the airwaves. It believes, though, that the community interest has been damaged to the extent that the broadcasting of emergency information on floods has been discouraged. The solution is that a condition of a licence to broadcast should be the mandatory transmission of any warning, bulletin or message which is forwarded by an accredited emergency service. To do this will require that local station management has the formal authority to break in to networked programming at short notice and to transmit independently of the parent station.

The format and detail of transmissions will need to be determined at the local level – that is between local station manager and (in the case of floods) regional State Emergency Service personnel – and there will need to be a disciplined approach by the SES in terms of recognising the need to keep bulletins succinct. Tools to help ensure this discipline exists have already been developed (Emergency Management Australia, 1999b).

Without a guarantee that local radio stations can operate independently during emergencies, an important contribution of radio to the resilience of regional communities is endangered. The time has now come to recognise what has happened over recent years and to set up procedures which will help maintain community safety and maximise the ability of members of the public to protect themselves and their belongings. When the digital spectrum is introduced it will be necessary to ensure that such procedures apply there as well as in traditional modes of radio provision.

Recently the New South Wales state government commissioned a report into flood management on the Hawkesbury-Nepean River, where a severe flood could necessitate the evacuation of some tens of thousands of people in a short period of time. The report recommended that the State Emergency Service “promote preparation or amendment of Federal legislation to establish a public broadcast emergency warning system utilising both radio and television” (Hawkesbury-Nepean Flood Management Advisory Committee, 1997, 67). The appropriate way to do this is not to create a complete new system (such as a separate emergency broadcasting facility), or to nominate a particular station as the ‘official’ one which will carry warnings and information, but to promote robust procedures which will ensure that warnings are broadcast over all relevant radio stations using appropriate words and with appropriate timeliness. Without such robust procedures the capacity for effective community responses to be mounted is much reduced and the potential for tragedy is enhanced.

To the extent that broadcast radio is increasingly unable to discharge a vital and traditional public safety obligation, we are risking this tragedy – not only in the communities of the Hawkesbury-Nepean River valley but in communities adjacent to all the state’s watercourses. Current trends are not only reducing the effectiveness of radio for warning purposes in the more frequent and routine flood events; they are ensuring that radio will not be able to play a significant role when genuinely severe and disastrous events occur as they do from time to time in all flood liable areas. The recriminations which will follow such events will undoubtedly include attacks on radio stations if information has not been broadcast appropriately. We have an opportunity to anticipate and defuse this problem now rather than passively allowing the problem to make itself even more apparent than it already is.

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