



BUSHFIRES AND THE MEDIA

REPORT NO: 1

Bushfires and the media: A preliminary literature review

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Bushfires and the Media: A preliminary literature review.¹

The review was undertaken to survey what had been written in a number of areas:

- a) media constructions of bushfires and bushfire risk,
- b) the role the media plays in shaping community responses to bushfires, and
- c) media relationships with fire and emergency services.

This literature review was designed to assist in the scoping of a larger research project.

WHAT WAS OUR METHODOLOGY?

We undertook an initial search of the catalogues of the State Library of Victoria, Emergency Management Australia, a number of university libraries, online databases and the Internet. Our focus was on literature dealing with the news media and not the way that bushfires had been understood in fictional literature, although as we note later, fiction and other forms of popular culture can be seen as a frame to our understanding of the meaning of bushfires. We sought published and unpublished reports by government authorities and independent researchers, books, and journal, newspaper and magazine articles, and the online transcripts of radio and television programs. (We did not seek copies of relevant 'grey literature' which might have been created and held by emergency organisations. We would expect to seek this kind of information as we develop relationships with those organisations in a possible second stage of this project.) We were seeking to survey both media representations

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themselves as well as reports and evaluations of media representations of bushfires (including those in the media). Predictably our best resources were print based materials as opposed to television or radio broadcasts as these leave the clearest traces in the form of library catalogue entries and shelf holdings. We acknowledge that this makes the result of the survey incomplete, but it is unlikely this situation can be remedied because of the ephemeral nature of much media output.

We searched mainly Australian, American and European sources because it was our perception that was where major wildfires were, and so it was likely to be where most of the critical literature would be found. In the end we found that most of our literature came from either Australian or US sources, and that while there were a number of issues common to both locations, some issues of concern in the US seemed less significant in Australia — possibly because of different policies in relation to land use and to fire management. It is likely that there is a literature on wildfires written in languages other than English (from parts of Asia for example) but the collection policies of the libraries and archives in which we searched do not reflect any such literature.

Our review of the relevant literature sought to examine three main areas: media constructions of bushfires and bushfire risk; the role the media play in shaping community responses to bushfires; and strategies for building more productive relationships between media and fire authorities. In writing up the results of this survey we have sought to place our findings into the context of recent developments in understanding relevant areas of media, and more particularly journalism.

The first observation from the survey is that, perhaps not surprisingly, a number of issues have been a feature of the literature for many years and continue to be subject to debate.

In relation to terminology used in this review we have generally used the term 'bushfires', although we recognise that in the US literature the term 'wildfires' is generally used. Sometimes when referring to the US context the American terminology will be apparent. In some of the Australian literature the term 'wildfires' does seem to be acceptable. Likewise, later in this review we will be making reference to policies of controlled burning, as these have been subject to some debate in the media. In the US the common term seems to be 'let burn', although 'let

burn' policies and 'controlled burn' policies are not equivalent. Controlled burning is a policy designed to prevent or mitigate future bushfires, whereas let burn policies seem to be more an expression of an assumption that fire is natural in wilderness areas and that periodic, naturally occurring fires have some positive ecological outcomes. We are not concerned, in this review, to debate fire management policies, however it will be necessary to make note of the ways in which debates about such policies enter into media constructions of bushfires.

MEDIA CONSTRUCTION OF BUSHFIRES AND BUSHFIRE RISK

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE DOMINANT CONSTRUCTIONS REPORTED IN THE LITERATURE?

Much of the literature on media constructions of bushfires details criticisms made of the media's treatment of the issues. These can be loosely grouped together into a number of areas:

- that media reports perpetuate a number of myths, clichés and flawed thinking concerning the causes of, and characteristics of bushfires, or of community responses to bushfires;
- that media reports portray those affected by fires as helpless victims at the mercy of forces beyond their control;
- that media reports engage in blaming and the creation of scapegoats; and
- that the presence of the media at bushfires is itself a stressor for fire agencies and distracts fire fighters from more important tasks.

In the section which follows we shall elaborate on these criticisms before seeking to place them into a wider context of literature on media and journalism. In the later section dealing with media relationships with fire and emergency services we shall discuss the development of media plans to enable fire agencies more effectively to deal with and pre-empt such criticisms.

MEDIA REPORTS PERPETUATE MYTHS

Conrad Smith (1992b), writing in the US, has been a major critic of media reporting of wildfires. His major work on media reporting of fires concerned a study of the media coverage of fires in the Yellowstone area of Montana. His criticisms of media coverage concluded that media tended to reinforce myths about fires, that journalists are more interested in the context in which facts are presented than in accuracy, and that they made the mistake of applying story models to wildfires which were more appropriate to urban fires (Smith 1992b, 64). Further, he noted media coverage of fires assumed that fires in wilderness areas are always bad, indicating the need for a longer term, ecological perspective. He discusses the issue in terms which are directly related to debates in the US concerning 'let burn' policies, however his commentary may have relevance to debates within Australia about the mitigating effects of 'controlled burn' policies.

While these issues are valid concerns for debate in the media they point to the need to separate long term issues from immediate and shorter term issues in media representations of bushfires. The concern about the lack of a longer term perspective is evident in a number of sources. McKay, for example, points to the need for the media to present information to help reduce the personal impact of fires but is concerned that 'vital issues in land use management such as restricting development or imposing building regulation on housing in fire prone areas were not given prominence' (1983, 289).

A second criticism of the media arises in McKay's discussion: the representation of those affected by fires as victims. She noted that

reports ... focussed on descriptions of victims as helpless during and after the event and also proved a general description of the loss. Over this period, victim and non-victim members of the public were provided with very little information which would help them to mitigate the personal impact of a future fire. (McKay 1983, 289)

One concern arising from the representation of residents in bushfire areas as victims is the consequent sense of helplessness in the face of fires, an attitude which may lead residents to become increasingly dependent on fire agencies. The following comment by McKay raises in the one paragraph several common themes in the discussion of media reporting of fires. Along with the presentation of residents as

victims, and a lack of attention to long term public policy debates about the role played by urban development, there is a third issue, scapegoating.

Often newspaper reports can undermine bushfire information campaigns by being too fatalistic and thus not stimulating the individual to adopt self protecting measures. The fatalistic reporting arises when causes of the bushfires are scapegoated to be either arsonists or poor management behavior in areas of natural bush. (McKay 1983, 300)

The concern here is that rather than developing a sense of self reliance, the causes of fires are being presented as out of the control of residents, thereby encouraging an attitude of fatalistic passivity. McKay goes on:

Clearly, there are many causes of fires but the preoccupation with the above does not help the community ask the broader questions about land-use zoning. The newspapers in New South Wales had many throw away lines baling arsonists. The land-use issues were only raised regarding the present situation that is urban areas abutting hilly fire prone areas of natural bushland. Whilst, it is not possible to prohibit development on a mere possibility of fire, it is possible however to agree to only develop some sites chosen for their amenability to back burning. That is to let urban development encroach where the environment is not so sensitive and that the community will agree to backburning. (1983, 300)

McKay's reference to scapegoating is one of several noted in the literature. The argument is that in searching for a 'hook' for stories about fires, especially in the days after the immediate event, media tend to fall back on tried and tested story structures. One of the prominent structures on which reporters fall back is the blaming of scapegoats, particularly arsonists (and sometimes looters) and fire authorities. For McKay the problem with scapegoating is it precludes deeper analysis of causes:

It is a pity that all in all that prominent news space coverage of the event there were no reports looking at the broader view about the multiple causes of the event and land-use policies. This is in keeping with the research on scapegoating. Once a scapegoat is found then any deeper underlying of causes are overlooked. Perhaps in the next major bushfire event the local papers will be able to reflect on the deeper issues and it will be possible to add a new category to the content themes in newspaper reporting that is, planning issues. (McKay 1983, 300)

In the case of the bushfires in the ACT in early 2003 there were several examples where the media raised the question of land use policies, but in such a way that this might have been seen as an example of scapegoating in its own right. For example

The media outlet which has drawn the most sustained local anger is Fairfax broadsheet *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which from the start ran

hard on the angle of who might be held responsible for the awful extent of the destruction.

Its very first fire story, on Monday, January 20, was headlined, “Why: Devastated City’s Agony”, and began: “Canberra’s government has been accused of failing to prepare adequately for the firestorm that killed four people and destroyed 368 houses in the worst bushfires to hit an Australian city.” The next day the paper ran an opinion piece by regular columnist Paddy McGuinness titled, “Canberra builds its own fire trap.’ (Jackson 2003)

Here legitimate concerns about land use policies seem to be being used as an occasion for wider political grandstanding. However, comments about 'deeper underlying causes' point to the need to make a distinction between long term debates about land use and control burn policies which may serve as factors in bushfires and the blaming which tends to occur in the immediate context of a bushfire. We will return to this issue later in this paper.

Another criticism of the media which arises in some of the literature is the role of the media in exacerbating stress, either for residents 'because of their presentation and interpretation of events' or for fire authorities by their mere presence. (Henderson and McKinney 2003; Moran 1995, 184,). Linked to this is a concern of some authorities that reporting of fires will lead to alarm in the community. The coronial inquest into the Canberra bushfires was told that 'firefighting authorities were wary of providing the media with information that might cause widespread alarm' (ABC news 2004).

A common theme in the treatment of media representations of bushfires is an ambivalence toward the media. On the one hand they are seen as important sources of information for the community, but on the other hand there is a concern with the potential for misinformation, the perpetuation of myths and 'flawed' story structures, and the possibility of alarm (Esplin 2003, 137) . This ambivalence suggests the need for a disaster media plan, an issue which is receiving increasing attention in the literature and which will be addressed in more detail later in this paper.

WHICH MEDIA?

To this point in the discussion the media have been treated as a single entity, however this is not always the case. Any attempt to understand the representation of fires in the media, and to develop strategic relationships between fire authorities and

the media needs to take into account the strengths and weaknesses of the different media, as well as any common patterns across them.

Newspapers are seen by some commentators as being superior media for warnings and information. Speaking of the fires in the ACT Sally Jackson quotes the editor of the *Canberra Times* claiming that 'No one else could tell this story as well as we could.'

That Saturday, and on following days, the paper completely remade itself, devoting up to 16 news pages to its fire coverage, with more space in its letters and opinion columns. The paper's print runs were substantially increased, but even so, two editions, on the Sunday and Monday, had to go to a second run after the first sold out (Jackson, 2003).

Nevertheless, in the immediate crisis of a fire emergency radio is seen as the first place to go to for information. Writing about the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983 in South East South Australia Pam and Brian O'Connor comment 'the radio stationswere, during the period of fire for people in endangered rural areas, often the only source of information' (1993, 153). They go on to make the point that although relaying news reports was important the most effective function of local radio stations was to pass on important information to the public from police, the CFS and other authorities. Citing specific examples they point to the strength of radio in the presentation of continual reports, messages and information, including advice on where help was available and reassurance to parents of evacuated school children. In addition authorities were able to use radio to request people not to use telephones needed for priority calls. Radio services attempted to alleviate the sense of disorientation and anxiety (O'Connor and O'Connor 1993, 154).

An important point to note about this use of radio, as networking increases in Australian radio, is 'how important it is for the regions to have their own media, which in times such as Ash Wednesday can be dedicated completely to meet the needs of their own community.' (O'Connor and O'Connor 1993, 155). The Esplin report into the 2003 Victorian fires noted a concern 'that some rural radio stations have skeleton staff as they relay feed from another station – generally in capital city that may be in another state. These stations are less able to respond to local emergency issues.' (Esplin 2003, 137) The important role of local radio has been noted in relation to the fires in the ACT in 2003. The McLeod report comments that:

Media coverage of the event varied. It was ABC Radio 666 that became the carrier of most information for the public in keeping with its service charter. The ABC had maintained close contact with ESB [Emergency Services Branch] as the fires were developing and had reporters available to deploy to ESB and the field as the emergency unfolded.' (McLeod 2003, 46)

A number of sources have reported on the importance of radio in both providing information and a sense of connectedness in the Canberra fires. For example, Worthington (2004), comments that 'all the time we had the radio tuned to ABC Radio 666 which had suspended normal programming and was working out on air how to be an emergency information service' a point which demonstrates both the importance of radio as a source of information for residents during a fire, and the lack of planning by media for emergencies. This latter point will be taken up below in the discussion of the need for a media disaster plan. As part of a larger argument about the potential for new networking technologies to be productively used in emergency situations, Worthington also comments that the Radio 666 website provided a useful service. The Canberra fires seem to be first for which the internet emerges as an important source of both information and personal stories about survival (Hughes 2003).

The important role of regional radio in providing immediate and accurate information in times of crisis, and its public service role (pointed to by McLeod), has been recognised in an agreement signed between ABC regional radio and emergency services in Victoria.

Under the agreement, ABC radio and emergency services will work together following set guidelines Certain officers will have the authority to call on editorial staff to interrupt their regular programs to broadcast information. Regular updates will be provided, people will be told about risk levels, when to implement fire plans and, just as importantly, when the risk has subsided. (Brady, 2004; see also Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2004).

Esplin considered radio sufficiently important in the emergency situation that he recommended:

13.97 That Victoria include an agenda item for both the National Emergency Management Committee and the National Meeting of Emergency Services Ministers recommending that the Australian Communications Authority review both the Commercial Radio Codes of Practice and Guidelines to ensure they provide necessary guidance and obligations on radio stations during emergencies and in relation to emergency warnings. (2003, 137)

MEDIA THEORY: HOW TO EXPLAIN SOME OF THESE CRITICISMS?

Nicole Brady, in reporting the agreement signed between the ABC and Victorian emergency services comments that during the Victorian fires of 2003 the relationship between fire authorities and media had sometimes been strained (2004). This is not surprising given that each party has different needs, but it is worth examining some of the assumptions being made in criticisms of the media in relation to emergencies. The common, taken for granted assumption about the media in much of the literature we have surveyed begins with the equation of all media with news media and journalism. Further the news media's role is seen as providing objective, accurate, factual information. This is a public information model of the media which assumes that there is an objective reality which it is the role of the media to present to audiences as 'truthfully' as possible. Absent from this view is the recognition that in any situation being reported by the media, including emergencies, there are a number of perspectives potentially available to journalists and editors. News professionals take on one or more of these perspectives as they report on the situation at hand.

Within daily routines constrained by short time frames and tight budgets news media have to find ways of trying to make sense of the world for their audiences. One way this has been achieved is through the development over time of a set of conventions known to media commentators and analysts as 'news values'. A clear understanding of news values is useful to enable understanding of why media stories are structured as they are, and to better prepare a disaster media plan.

The study to which most studies of news values refer is the 1965 study by Johan Galtung and Marie Ruge (1965), who identified a list of values by which they argued working journalists and sub editors determine what constitutes news. They suggested that the more an event embodied these values the more likely it was to be considered newsworthy. Among the news values relevant to some of the criticisms of the media discussed so far are: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness (including cultural perspective and relevance) predictability and demand, unexpectedness (including unpredictability and scarcity) continuity and composition and personalisation (McGregor 2002, 1).

A number of these news values are worth developing in more detail. Frequency is to do with the relationship between the time span of an event and the deadlines of schedules of media outlets. Threshold is to do with the magnitude of an event and can be related to cultural proximity so that an event is seen as having greater magnitude the closer it is in both cultural and geographic terms to the audience. Unambiguity is a measure of the degree to which it seems possible to make sense of the event, its lack of complexity. Familiar story models can be applied to events to make them less ambiguous. Events which are ongoing may well develop a degree of complexity which is problematic. Through personalisation events are seen to be the acts of individuals, hence the attempt by media to find a person on whom to hang a story — a heroic fire fighter, and arsonist, an incompetent urban planner.

The list has been revised by a number of media theorists including John Fiske (1987, 281-308), who added the concept of negativity to the list, and McGregor (2002), who has identified four contemporary news values: visualness, emotion, conflict and the turning of journalists into celebrities in their own right. In visual terms a bushfire event is much more newsworthy than longer term causal factors. Bushfires provide plenty of opportunity for visual material and it is the visual elements of the story which may well determine how it is treated by the media. Seeking scapegoats as hooks on which to hang a story provides the potential for an emotional response to loss of personal property, or for the emotion of righteous anger, and it provides the potential for conflict — between individuals or between the more abstract forces of good and evil, or commonsense and stupidity.

News values are not a set of prescribed rules which are laid down for journalists to follow. The lists of news values which have been developed by researchers (and there are variations on the lists of values mentioned above) are the result of analyses of a large range of news broadcasts, and observations of work processes and practices (Tuchman 1978). Journalism relies on established routines and practices formed at the everyday level, and it is 'through repetition that journalistic practices are tried, tested and cemented, becoming routine' (Ewart 2002). Some understanding of the practise and routines of journalism, and of the values these practices embody, allows an understanding of the production contexts of news and for a move away from hand wringing criticisms and towards practical ways of working with the media in emergency situations.

Given the adoption of these news values by working journalists the media tend to focus on event rather than context: news values are event focussed, a fact bemoaned by Conrad Smith in his study of wildfires.

The assumption that network coverage would tend to focus on the fires themselves rather than the context in which they occurred proved true. Analysis of verbal themes in the network stories showed the recurring motif of flames and smoke with little interpretation or background to provide perspective. Experts on the four panels that evaluated the stories generally agreed with that analysis. For example, ecologist Norman Christensen said: “None of the networks attempted to place this event in any context or synthesize the information. All closed the story with a superficial happy ending.” (1992b, 50)

This focus on event rather than longer term context is a factor in a number of criticisms of the media. Continuing his criticism Smith quotes 'fire behaviour expert' David Thomas: 'I've often felt ... that reporters don't dig beyond the common clichés associated with forest fires – scorched earth, epic events, devastation and destruction, etc. – and the result is a one-sided, one-dimensional view of fire.'(Smith 1992b, 6)

With some understanding of news values these observations would not be unexpected. News values tend more easily to be applied to events rather than to the contexts in which events occur, and tend to favour short term issues rather than long term perspectives. They can be applied more easily to an immediate event such as a bushfire than to background conditions to do with land use patterns, peri-urban development, controlled burn policies and important aspects of the context in which fires may be understood. A recognition of this explains some of the patterns of reporting noted by both McKay (1983) and Smith (Smith 1989a, 1989b, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c), and has important implications for the development of any media disaster plan.

In recent years media theory has moved beyond prescriptive views of the media. It is no longer assumed that there is a single stable and unchanging reality which exists beyond the observer and which it is the role of the media to present as 'accurately' as possible. This alternative view assumes that the media present a range of 'discourses' about the world. This understanding of media can fruitfully be applied to news media and journalism, but is also applicable to fictional representations of bushfires in ways that are more productive than simplistic notions of accuracy and truthfulness of representation. From this perspective, rather than decrying the various

myths about bushfires which circulate in our culture, the aim is to understand the myths and how they might shape peoples' responses to bushfires. Are bushfires presented, for example, as an inevitable feature of Australian life? How do we respond to bushfires — communally or individualistically? The common stories about bushfires, which will no doubt have changed over time, provide the context in which the more specific concerns of information and warning dissemination are understood. Studies of advertising and public relations have taught us that any individual campaign needs to be aware of the social and cultural contexts within which it is received by intended audiences. Any attempt to produce a media disaster plan needs to take into account the broader cultural context within which the plan operates.

One potential area for future research would be an historical study of the variety of cultural constructions of bushfires in Australian culture beyond the limited scope of journalism and information to provide a more fine grained understanding of the contexts in which the media representations of bushfires are received.

BUILDING MORE PRODUCTIVE MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS WITH FIRE AUTHORITIES

NEED FOR A DISASTER MEDIA PLAN

Our survey of the literature indicates that it is only relatively recently that much attention has been paid to relations between the media and fire authorities. The Royal Commission into the Victorian fires of 1939 (Victoria. State Government 1939) made scant mention of the media. However the need for a disaster media plan, to enable fire authorities better to manage the media in emergency situations, has been recognised for some time now. 'During a large incident, such as a bushfire or a major urban fire, the media is a resource to be exploited by the fire service. It is the critical conduit for information to the general public in terms of warnings and other information.' (Schauble 1998, 367)

In 1982 bushfires devastated large tracts of land in Tasmania. In his analysis of the events Neil Britton of the James Cook University's Centre for Disaster Studies, was one of the first researchers in Australia to pay attention to communication difficulties between the news media and fire fighting bodies in a bushfire situation. He provided a short list of areas where an improvement in 'dialogue' was called for. (Britton 1983)

Britton began with the most basic: that there be a recognition that media and fire fighters are partners in a civil emergency, rather than antagonists. There has to be a flow of relevant, accurate, up-to-date, unambiguous information. This requires one or several trained media liaison officers who act as spokespersons and are known to media personnel. However, journalists also need training in order to report responsibly and without exaggeration, misinformation or fanciful interpretations of events. (Britton 1983, 195-198) A number of Britton's recommendations have been taken up in more recent years.

1983, the year when this report appeared, brought devastating bushfires to Victoria. The fires were reported on news services around the world and the attention paid by fire fighting bodies and governments to the role of the media in reporting their performances in emergency situations came ever more into focus. Although every bushfire season proved the correctness of Neil Britton's analysis, few commentators actually focussed on the problem of communication. Most attention was still paid to the fires themselves, their causes, their handling.

That little progress was made in the intervening years was shown in 1998 by John Schauble, then one of the *Melbourne Age's* staff journalists. In a conference paper he gave good advice to fire services as well as media personnel on how to proceed when gathering information on a bushfire. He proposed an understanding of the other party's needs and constraints was essential. Tight deadlines on the side of the press; an ongoing emergency on that of the firefighters. But, he urged, firefighters have to put up with the inconvenience of reporters at the moment when they have least time to do so. The most senior officer, or should he be unavailable, a designated contact person, should be in charge of delivering the required information. Since journalists are going to obtain a story in any way they can, this is the most responsible arrangement that will benefit both sides by delivering accuracy and a considered, calm approach to the emergency situation. To the individual who might be approached by media personnel he advises: 'If you can't say it 'on the record', then don't say it at all,' to guard against outbursts of anger or ill considered remarks about fellow-officers or the perceived misjudgements by state government officials. (Schauble 1998, 368-372)

However, the scenario which Schauble recorded in 1998 no longer exists. No fire fighter in Victoria is allowed to speak to media, although they can be photographed

and filmed on the job. Because of the problems of inappropriate remarks or misleading comments by fire fighters outlined by Schauble, all information on bushfires in Victoria is now issued by the Department of Sustainability and Environment. Fire fighters who speak to media personnel, even off the record, will face disciplinary action. But as the 2002 Esplin Report showed, trying to control the flow of information on a raging bushfire somewhere in the State's north-east through a spokesperson in Melbourne brings a new set of problems. Where the release of bushfire-related information to the media is decentralised, a Public Information Officer is often too expensive for a small community, as Bert Henderson and Phoenix McKinney indicate in a short article in *Fire Chiefs*, a U.S publication addressing practical problems arising in fire fighting. (Henderson and McKinney 2003, 54-55) They point out that reporters are generally quick to appear on the scene of a fire, distracting crews who are concentrating on fighting the blaze rather than answering questions. But appearing uncooperative will give the firefighters a bad press, with the consequent negative assessments of their work from government and the public. The authors' answer is to train fire fighters themselves to deal with the media in effective and simple ways, a solution which has not been tried in Victoria. They recommend to 'train your firefighters in media relations at least once a year. There are public relations media trainers who have excellent programs that bring first-hand experience about dealing with the media in emergency response and crisis situations.' (Henderson and McKinney 2003, 55). They go on to give the advice to be accurate, quick, concise and unambiguous, so that misunderstandings or misquotes cannot happen.

Recently three major fire events (Ash Wednesday, the ACT fires and those in northern Victoria in 2003) have all focussed more attention on relations between fire authorities and the media. The approach to the handling of the media in an emergency situation by Peter O'Neill, in a conference paper in May 2004, demonstrates the sophistication of thinking that has developed in this area in recent times. He argues the preparation a 'Crisis Media Plan' before an emergency occurs will avoid blunders and unnecessary diversions of personnel, and that this should be part of the overall 'business continuity plans' of any organisation. Making full use of computer technology and its ability rapidly to generate, distribute and disseminate information, O'Neill's recommendations aim at rapid response and damage control by

professional media personnel who understand how the different media operate and how to address the needs of different audiences. (2003, 54)

Stressing the need for up-to-date and accurate information his paper gives advice on what to consider in a media interview, so that the organisation appears to in a positive light, He argues that a well prepared media releases can be used both appease the public and please the media. In a media conference, he recommends what has always been commonsense strategy and basic politeness: 'Keep the statement brief, provide a copy of your statement, express sympathy first, do not lie, do not apportion blame.' (2003, 12)

Discussing the reasons why a media disaster plan is needed O'Neill draws on the experience of the Canberra fires which involved 'a community that on the whole, was not aware of the threat or prepared for such a large disaster. The Australian Capital Territory Emergency Services (ACTES) had one media officer and had not developed a crisis communication plan to manage the media during the disaster.' As a result the coverage of the fires was uneven and the information sought by the media was not always available. (O'Neill, 3-4). For O'Neill one of the significant advantages of a proper media strategy is that senior staff can devote full energies to fighting fires: 'A significant consequence of the heavy media demands of the ACTES was the diversion of senior management from operational matters to assist in the media response' (2003, 4)

These recommendations by O'Neill point to the need for future planning to better enable an appropriate response at the time of an emergency. There are at least three phases to media coverage of fires which need to be planned for. The shortest term deals with the immediate fire situation, while the fire is still raging, the medium term deals with recovery from the fire, while the longest term deals with the debates which surround bushfires generally: the debates about land use planning, debates about control burn and alpine grazing policies. These longer term issues can too easily descend into blaming at the time, but do raise crucial issues which need to be debated in the community so that in the immediate situation community confidence is maintained.

In the short term a well prepared media plan enables fire agencies to be proactive rather than reactive. O'Neill argues that in Canberra the ACT Emergency Services

missed valuable opportunities to gain community support and disseminate fire preparedness information (2003,1 4). In public relations terms such information dissemination provides opportunities to develop the 'brand' of the emergency services and increase community goodwill toward them. The McLeod report into the Canberra fires noted that 'a well managed media function greatly helps with the management of an incident. The Inquiry recommends that action be taken to strengthen the media and public relations capacity within ESB (Emergency Services Branch).' (McLeod 2003, 183) This can then have benefits into the medium term. The ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce report argued that 'This heightened awareness also meant that it was important to create and maintain a sense of confidence that adequate preparations were in place for the next fire season.' (2003, 82)

For Schauble, considering how often disasters occur, it is surprising how little the media organisations themselves plan for the occurrence of potential disasters (1998, 361). One of the benefits of a well formulated media plan is the potential for fire agencies to be proactive and do much of this planning. Conrad Smith pointed to several lessons for journalists and journalism educators from his research. These were: the need to resist the temptation to apply to all stories with a similar subject matter the same treatment; to aim for literal accuracy at the expense of the essence of the story; and for journalists who are outside their normal beats to be sensitive to their own lack of expertise and learn to rely on others. (1992b, 69)

Smith's observation points to several issues: the first raises again the question of news values and the ways in which story models are used by the media — however one might decry this practice, it nevertheless occurs. Given the economics of news gathering, a media plan needs to be developed to provide material which will either fit the story models being used, or preclude the need for journalists to drop their coverage into a standard story model. One way of effectively managing the media has been through the establishment of a media information centre. Well organised and well equipped centres can serve as the focus of attention

... (minimising the chances that that focus will stray to areas you'd prefer to leave unexamined). It also provides a place to concentrate your organisation's media resources so that they communicate more effectively with each other and with management, have a clearer idea of both the overall media strategy and the day-to-day tactics of the operation's media aspects, and can more rapidly respond to any changes in the crisis situation. (O'Neill 2003, 8)

Sue Netterfield (1998, 18) points to the successful use of such a centre at the Thredbo disaster. The important element of the Media Centre is not the physical space, although it needs to be near where the action is happening, but its function as 'a central point of contact for the media. The media usually appear at a very early stage of an incident, emergency or threat. The [media centre] is the place to go' (Netterfield 1998, 19). The existence of such centres where continuous briefings are available is taken for granted by Riha and Handschuh. (1995, 34-35). Media centres of this type have been central to the US Military's management of journalists during the two wars in Iraq. As with bushfires, these military Media Centres operate in a potentially ambiguous situation, where the lives of military personnel and journalists are at risk and where the management of public perceptions of the situation is of concern to both the military and governments. There is, no doubt, a growing literature on this which could be fruitfully investigated, along with the literature on the advantages and disadvantages of the use of 'embedded' journalists.

In looking for examples of effective media plans we can look to those used in other emergency situations. Schauble points to lessons learned at Port Arthur and at Lockerbie where

... emergency managers implemented a plan that hinged on the development of a working relationship with the media, the rapid dissemination of accurate information delivered regularly by trained communicators who understood in detail the way journalists operate when covering disasters. They used other tactics, including the presence – both real and symbolic – of the controlling organisation's chief executive. They both cajoled and threatened, appealing to the goodwill of the journalists to honour and respect the victims and survivors, while making it clear that access to higher levels of incident management would be cut off to those reporters who did not cooperate. They used exclusion zones and pooling, but at all times making it clear to reporters why this was necessary in some areas. (1998, 366)

TRAINING ISSUES

A well developed media strategy calls for improved training. On the one hand fire fighters need training in how to deal with media; on the other hand media organisations need basic fire awareness training. Knowlton (1989) provides a basic set of instructions on how to be properly prepared when a crisis breaks out. His training booklet deals with: the need to have a well prepared, designated spokesperson to manage media interviews; the need for everyone in the organisation

to be aware of who the spokesperson is and their role; the preparation of an adequate statement prior to media conferences; how to end an interview; how to decline an interview; and secrets of success in media interviews (stay in command by presenting sound reasons for action, do not apportion blame, and correct in accurate reporting).

On the other side of the relationship the media need fire awareness training. The Victorian Country Fire Authority (CFA) has recognised this and during 2002 provided training and accreditation for media personnel. The CFA media forum seeks to address two common concerns about media at fires. The first is the minimisation of risks to media personnel, and the second is to encourage more accurate reporting by 'dispelling myths about why houses burn and why people die in bushfires' (Country Fire Authority of Victoria 2000, 1). Such training seeks to address criticisms of media presence at fires as stressors for firefighters and 'ensured that media were aware of operational procedures and protocols, fire behaviour and foreground safety, with only accredited and properly equipped media being allowed near the fireground.' ('Biggest event' 2003)

During media training days, among other things, participants are put on a fire pad with 'a furiously hot gas fire nearby to give them the feel for the peril of radiant heat' because of CFA concerns about inadequate clothing being worn by some journalists at fire scenes (Jackson 2002, B07).

Following this the Victorian Country Fire Authority has recently published on the Internet a series of protocols regulating the conduct of and responsibility for journalists in search on-site information on bushfires.

Priority access to fire sites will be given to properly trained and equipped journalists, holders of a CFA Media Accreditation Pass, who have lodged a request with the 'Incident Management Team.'

In order to gain access to the 'Staging Area' media personnel have to be accompanied by or under instruction from a 'specifically tasked CFA of DSE officer.'

'No media persons are to be in [...] "at-risk" locations unescorted.'

Media access to vehicles or aircraft is only possible once they are not required for fire suppression.

There is a command hierarchy from Sector Commander over Division Commander to Staging Area Manager whose directions have to be obeyed at all times.

Access through Traffic Management Points is restricted. (Rees and Morgan 2003)

Riha and Handschuh (1995) see fire training of journalists as part of the role of the joint media information centre, which has been touched on above, however a longer term training program would seem consistent with the argument advanced by several writers for well developed prior preparation for emergencies.

A PHASED ROLE FOR THE MEDIA

As we have already indicated it is possible to recognise a number of distinct roles for the media in the planning for, dealing with, and recovery from bushfires. A well thought out media strategy would need to recognise the potential roles of the media in each of these phases. A number of the sources referred to above clearly recognise the role of the media in the immediate emergency. However the role of the media needs to be recognised in the recovery stage after the fire. During the recovery phase after a disaster or emergency in which the performance of the organisation will be more critically analysed, O'Neill advises to draw attention to what is being done to restore and clean up the disaster site (2003, 12).

The important role of the media was central to the work of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce in the ACT in 2003.

While there was national and international interest, the Taskforce's main emphasis was on working with local media outlets, which had an ongoing part to play in the recovery process.

Print (The Canberra Times) and radio (ABC Canberra) media provided the majority of the coverage. However, local television stations ABC and WIN and commercial radio have also continued to run a range of recovery stories.

In addition, there were significant local and national documentary style programs, including a number of stories on the local ABC Stateline program, ongoing stories on the ABC Dimensions series and a story on the Catalyst science program.

Media interest has increased at anniversary points such as 100 days and when relevant reports were released (Bushfire Recovery Taskforce ACT 2003, 80).

The longest term phase is the period between fire events during which it is more appropriate to have debates, perhaps even at a national level, over urban development policies, control burn policies and so on. During these debates many other groups will inevitably participate: ecologists, farmers organisations, local

councils and so on. Media management is still an option here, however more 'strategy' is needed to create events on which media can hang stories. The release of reports into previous fires is an example of the sort of event that can be used to promote important long term debates, and to reduce the chance of them becoming distractions during emergency fire events.

CONCLUSIONS

As noted earlier our literature search and the subsequent discussion this review has concentrated on journalistic and non-fictional representations of bushfires. However many representations of bushfires with the potential to frame perceptions of bushfires and bushfire risk and influence attitudes, are available in other non-journalistic forms of media, such as television drama programs. *Neighbours* (Ten Network, Australia) has featured narratives about bushfires (episodes 1347, December 1990, and 3670 November 2000), and in 2004 the ABC launched a new series *Fireflies* (*Fireflies* 2004). A study of the representation of bushfires and bushfire risk in popular culture and mainstream literature could yield some interesting insights into how bushfire is framed within Australian culture. It could examine the mythic role of bushfires, passivity or fatalism in the face of 'natural' forces or self reliance and agency and individual heroism, or community cohesion. Such a study would deal with a range of fictional accounts. The purpose of such a project would be to examine the cultural context of non-fictional representations, because media theory tells us that people will not make sense of non-fictional material in isolation.

While we have been concentrating on formal media sources of information about bushfires other less formal sources are emerging. Personal Web based 'weblogs' created by non-experts and non-professional journalists are emerging and they provide information about bushfires, personal stories and witness accounts.

But a key issue not covered in the literature we have surveyed is that of the attitudes to, and experiences of media professionals and media organisations to the situation they find themselves in when they are attempting to cover bushfires. Most reports and proposals are written from the perspective of emergency organisations. The perspective of media organisations has not been taken into account. Also we have not been able to discover any evaluations of the success of particular media management and media briefing strategies in relation to bushfires.

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