



## BUSHFIRES AND THE MEDIA

REPORT NO: 3

# Reporting bushfires: What motivates the media?

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## SUMMARY

This report examines an aspect of the relationship between fire services and the media in the context of bushfires in Victoria. This is a third report in an ongoing series. The first report was a preliminary literature review. The second explored different approaches adopted by Victorian fire services in dealing with the media before, during and after fires.<sup>1</sup> This third report looks at the other side of the coin, by exploring what motivates media organisations in reporting about bushfires.

Two of the main concerns for personnel from fire agencies are the safety of media personnel and their presence on the fire ground and a perception that media coverage tends to sensationalise bushfires and perpetuate 'disaster myths' which may place communities and individuals at risk.

For media personnel, however, the key issues about reporting bushfires are:

1. a need to get to the incident area in order to present compelling stories which made the event 'come alive' for their audiences,
2. a need to distinguish between 'news', 'community safety information' and 'public relations', and
3. a need to recognise that one of media organisation's motives in covering bushfires is also a sense of social responsibility.

Suggestions arising from this research are that there is a need to challenge the common tendency of fire agencies to regard all media as a single homogeneous sector. The media views presented in this report are from journalists who work at the ABC, the *Age* and the *Australian*, which are often considered to be the more

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, P. and White, P.B. (2005) Bushfires and the Media: A preliminary literature review. (Bushfires and the Media: Report No 1) Bundoora: La Trobe University; Cohen, E., Hughes, P., & White, P. B. (2006). The Media and Fire Services – Public relations and community information: A Victorian view. (Bushfires and the Media: Report No. 2). Bundoora: La Trobe University

'serious' and 'responsible' media sector in Australia. It can be argued that such media are not a 'typical' of other Australian media that may tend to neglect the safety messages altogether and concentrate more on the drama and sensationalism of the event. This sort of media infotainment, it is argued, will tend to perpetuate the idea that someone is to blame for bushfires and that people are often helpless victims. While this report does not deal directly with the more sensational media coverage the distinction between the more 'serious' and more 'sensational' media reinforces the general contention about the differences between media.

The report stresses that different media have different strengths and different imperatives, and as a consequence, different motivations. Recognising such distinctions may enable fire agencies to better recognise and understand journalists' motives in reporting about bushfires. Such an understanding may contribute further to the development of better media management practices and may improve the working relations between journalists and fire agencies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Bushfires are dramatic and compelling. Although not the most deadly or destructive of natural disasters, the spectacle of bushfires attracts large public interest and gains extensive media attention.<sup>2</sup> These events, especially in case of threat to communities and entire regions, are dramatic and highly emotional. Reporting such events, like the coverage of other technological and natural disasters, tends to capture audience attention through the vivid portrayal of devastation and human suffering. Media interest in such events will often continue from the onset of the disaster, through to its aftermath and the recovery phases. The media's ability to communicate with a mass audience makes emergency organisations' engagement with the media vital for delivering safety announcements and warnings to threatened communities. Similarly,

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<sup>2</sup> From 1788 to 2003 there were 2292 deaths caused by floods in Australia while during the same period there were 696 deaths caused by bushfires (Gigliotti, 2005). It is important to remember, however, that bushfires play a central role in the history of the European settlement in Australia. Major fires are embedded in the Australian collective memory and specific fire histories are significant for many local communities living in fire prone areas. The media and in particular newspapers are one of the main sources for such historical records. An interesting example is Schauble (1992) who describes the history of fire and fire-fighting in the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria.

the media may also play an important role in the recovery phase by helping publicise particular issues and by providing a space where individuals and entire communities can tell their stories.

The goal of this report is to present journalists' understandings, experiences and motivations in the context of reporting of bushfires. Understanding the perspective of media personnel is important in light of the various effects that media reporting may have in relation to particular incidents and on the broader issue of bushfires preparation, disaster mitigation and community expectations.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on thirteen semi-structured interviews with journalists (774 ABC Melbourne, the *Age* and the *Australian*) and emergency personnel from two different fire agencies in Victoria, the Department of Sustainability and Environment – (DSE) and the Country Fire Authority – (CFA). The interviews were carried out during the 2005 fire season. Major themes concerning the relationships between Victorian fire agencies and the media before, during and post bushfire incidents were identified. The findings of this limited qualitative research cannot be easily generalised, however, they facilitate the discussion of important issues that are relevant to other emergency and media organisations in relation to bushfires and fire management in Australia.

## **HOW ARE THE MOTIVES OF THE MEDIA PERCEIVED?**

The reporting of bushfires, as well as the delivery of prevention and preparation information are well integrated into media work in Victoria. Victorian fire agencies actively promote (in the media and by other means) information and community warnings during incidents and in relation to fire preparedness and fire prevention. The media have a different set of priorities when it comes to reporting on bushfires. This is especially the case when fires is seen as important 'news events'. Generally speaking, the media tend to react to bushfires as events, rather than raise the issue of bushfires as a general topic.

The media treats bushfires as it treats any other news event, so it tends to react to them rather than spend a lot of time in a proactive sense. ... fire

authorities would like the media to be a bit more proactive in prevention and in delivering the pre-fire season stuff and a little bit of that happens, but it is contingent on what sort of summer we are having.

I can remember a couple of years ago, and this is the first time it has ever happened, the editor actually came to me and said, 'look it's really dry and quite dangerous and we need to do something ahead of the bushfire season' - so we run a series of articles. This was before the 2002-2003 fires so he was quite correct to do that. (A journalist from the Age)

This is an instance of an editor who, due to extreme weather conditions, decides to address this topic proactively. Decisions to write or not to write about bushfires and the different ways diverse media organisations might do so, are largely shaped by different organisational interests. Media interest in bushfires may come and go in relation to frequency, effects or outcomes of specific fires or the intensity of a particular fire season. Clearly, to a certain degree media interest in bushfires may be encouraged by effective public relations or safety campaigns promoted by the fire agencies. Some media organisations, for example ABC Local Radio, may develop a special interest or even expertise in bushfires. In some cases such interest may be driven by commercial competition or, as the case with the ABC, from a specific set of values and understandings.

The media's motives for reporting bushfires are sometimes regarded as suspect by fire agencies who perceive such interest as a disguise for their 'real' (i.e. commercial or audience building) intentions. An interviewee from the CFA nicely illustrates this sort of criticism.

Well I would suspect [writing about bushfires] is good value for them because prior to the fire season, in the preparedness phase, they know that there is a large number of people who are interested in bushfires and the threat of bushfires. But where they are always coming from is about 'is it going to be a bad season?' So there is that anticipation of a bad event.

They really only get interested probably in late November, December, when summer approaches and it makes sense to them to have a story in the paper about it. What they really like us to do is give them something like, 'The chief officer of the CFA said Victoria could face major problems' that is their ideal quote.

Prior to the event they are also increasingly interested in being seen as socially responsible by carrying the safety messages. So we usually do not have much trouble in getting these messages out and we get many supplements and stuff like that put in the papers. And for some media it could be motivated by money making but really, it is just because they know that there is a market out there for fire related stuff.

During the event, it is pretty clear that their interest is in the drama of it all, the scale of the event, the impact or the excitement of how the CFA is dealing with it. This is pretty much their traditional disaster-focus reporting. And then, after the event, the media carry on with the impact stories of blame and all that. I am sure people have models of a phased coverage of the disaster that will fit perfectly with the way the media operate. (CFA staff member)

The above is a rather cynical view of the media interest in the topic of bushfires. The research literature and other interviews with emergency personnel indicate that there is also a concern about the media sensationalising bushfires.<sup>3</sup> It seems that it is the media 'drama' that generates most objections. For emergency services, the fear is that media sensationalism may result in individuals and communities overestimating or underestimating the risk posed by fire. This may then influence decisions in preparing or not preparing for fires. Furthermore, 'dramatic' media reporting during incidents may alter the advised behaviour during fires and potentially put individuals at risk.<sup>4</sup>

Such issues are often linked to what emergency organisations regard as 'disaster myths'. By conducting public and media awareness campaigns concerning fire behaviour and disaster mitigation, fire agencies hope to change potentially dangerous behavioural patterns in relation to fire and to promote better preparation and disaster mitigation strategies. For this reason fire agencies see it as their role to fight such myths.

Once you've got people understanding bushfires to be a 'fire storm' why would you believe you could defend yourself? Why would you believe you could protect your house? If you think houses explode why would you bother starting to prepare yourself? You'll take your risk on the road. (CFA staff member)

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<sup>3</sup> White, P. & Hughes P. 'The Media, Bushfires and Community Resilience'. In (eds.) Douglas Paton and David Johnston, *Disaster Resilience: An integrated approach* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> It is likely that media reporting plays a role in the decision-taking of individuals to prepare or not to prepare for fires, and that this may also influence the decision to stay or evacuate their homes. The work of Douglas Paton (2003) indicates that such decisions are based on a discrete cognitive reasoning process. While media reporting is not the focus of Paton's analysis, it is arguable that media reporting may provide an important context for such cognitive reasoning and is vital in raising public concerns in relation to real or alleged risks.

Such statements assume that there is a direct correlation between the immediate media coverage and how individuals and communities react to fires. The aim of emergency organisations, therefore, is to work with the media as a harm minimisation 'tool' by educating the public about fires and potential risks and in delivering specific warnings during incidents. But what are the motives of media organisations and journalists in their dealings with the issue of bushfires?

## **THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN 'INFORMATION' AND 'NEWS'**

Journalists make a distinction between 'information' (safety lift-out supplements on how to prepare your house for fire, what to do during a fire, stay or go policies and so forth) and immediate event-related 'news' (or stories) where their motivation is somewhat different. Rather than delivering 'information' and letting emergency organisations 'have it their way', it is the process of 'story telling' that becomes the main issue for journalists. The challenge for the journalists is to write a story that reflects the way they experience the 'reality' (and the drama) of the event.

If you go with a preconceived notion of what makes a good story you will miss the good story. When I went there (to a bushfire) that day we were not expecting anything big to happen. The locals were expecting high temperatures and high winds the following day. So I went to talk to the local guy and he told us to get in the back of the car and in an hour or so we were in these God awful circumstances. I think they knew after we had left that it was going to be bad but we didn't know it was going to be so bad.

That day I was just looking for a story about patrolling the lines, lighting back burns, I wanted some nice pictures for a brief story I was writing for the next day, thinking that the following day might be big. But when we arrived it all just happened. I might have been disappointed that I did not get 30 cm picture story but really what was going on was a real story. With natural disasters ... You tell people what is already there, what you see. The drama is there for itself. (A journalist from the *Age*)

In that sense even if journalists have been through fire safety training (like that conducted by the CFA) they may still report the fire as they experience it. As one journalist argues, his feeling in experiencing a bushfire was that there was a gap between what he saw and what he was told was possible in relation to fire behaviour.

They tell you that houses don't explode but they sure as hell bloody burn down quickly. They tell you that cars don't explode and stuff, but it seems

like that. So you say what you see but you also write that scientifically they say it cannot happen like that. In the online version of the paper we can put hyperlinks to let you know about all that other [scientific] stuff. (A journalist from the Age)

A similar argument about representing 'reality' was raised by another journalist who similarly argued that the 'drama' is in the reality of fire itself and is not a construction of the reporters or photographers.

A DSE lady said to me once, 'all you guys are interested in, is photographing the sensational side of the fire', and I turned to her and said 'have you ever been in an Australian wildfire?' and she said no, and I said well, whichever way you want to look at it, it is sensational, so don't tell me I am looking for the sensational because the sheer nature of it makes it sensational. You may interpret it [the image or the story] anyway you want to interpret it. All I am doing is photographing it as accurately as it is being presented on the ground at the time. And if that happens to be sensational that's because it is sensational. (A journalist from the Age)

In order for journalists to describe the 'reality', which they do by using words, emotions and images, they need to get close to the action.

You really have to be there. The very fact of being somewhere, where something like that happens gives you a sense that you do not get from a telephone. I can say that it was terrifying and blah blah blah, but I can actually show people how terrifying it was using my camera or my words. Writing is about emotions. Writing is about showing people what is going on and it is about touching them in a way, and invoking in them the reaction that it had in you. If I had an emotional reaction like, 'Oh my God I am going to die!' Then I'd like to touch it in you, to make you have a sense of, 'Oh my God this guy is going to die!' ... so you will have a good sense of what it was like to be in that position. (A journalist from the Age)

The non-emotive language used by emergency services, in communicating risk and community warnings to the public, stands in contrast to the desire of the journalist to portray their emotional responses to fires and to tell a compelling story. So tensions emerge between the fire agencies' wish to control journalists' access to the fire ground (for safety or other reasons) and the need of the journalists and more often the photographers, to get as close as they can to the 'real' event.

When you have something like that going on [a big bushfire] - which is what the situation was, you can't expect to take me to a small back burn and present that to the Australian public as the truth of what was happening on that day, because it wasn't. It's not an accurate record and I won't sit with that and I won't tolerate that. (A journalist from the Age)



It is in this precise context that any attempt by fire agencies to frame the story in a particular way (for operational, community safety or even political reasons) may be perceived by the journalists as an attempt to 'dilute' the reality of the story or the event as they see it.

Getting in there and seeing it there gives a better sense of what it is like. I will tell you how it works. Let's assume you are a public relations person at the DSE. The person with the story is over there. So you hear their story and interpret what this person has said. So it filtered through you. Then it comes through your filter and it goes to me but it has already been filtered once. So it is kind of a bad coffee – and I am now filtering again what you told me. So by the time it gets to the newspaper it is going to be weak and it is not going to be very tasty. It just does not work. The guy on the ground is the guy with the story and when it goes through one filter, the journalist, who if they are any good, will mean you get a decent cup of coffee or a good decent story. If it goes through the public relations media person all the good bits are taken out - I mean, would you buy a paper for that? (A journalist from the *Age*)

Furthermore, a criticism by fire agencies of journalists dramatising or misrepresenting the issue is understood by journalists as an attempt to prevent them from providing their readers with *true* information. Any criticism or efforts to 'hold off' the media are therefore immediately suspected as attempts of 'spin doctoring'.

One man's accuracy is another man's propaganda. When they say that they want us to be more accurate what they probably are saying is that they want us to be nicer to them. Well tough! Get real! Because we have got to report it as we see it. I don't know any journalists that go out of their way to distort or fabricate information for political ends or whatever. (A journalist from the *Age*)

Clearly, journalists dislike or distrust of 'media management' practices used by governments and other organisations is not restricted to bushfires alone. Most fire agencies run media liaison departments and employ public relations personnel. Such departments monitor the media and develop strategies to manage their organisation's public image and its media relations. Yet by employing these strategies, journalists feel that organisations have become less accessible to the media and therefore cannot be trusted.

In the last ten to fifteen years all the state bureaucracies have become a bit more impenetrable. I have absolutely no idea why this is so and it drives me nuts and it is not just the public sector. Ten years ago, if I wanted to talk to a chief executive I would ring them directly. I had their direct phone number. These days you have to ring a public relations

person and often you cannot get through to the people at all, people with whom you thought you could have established a personal relationship. There is a lot more management going on. There are more public relations people than journalists and the public relations is like a wall that has been built up. If it was up to me I would never deal with a public relations person. I would try to deal with the person who knows what is going on, the one who is making the decisions. But you can't ... and basically, as far as I am concerned, if there is a public relations person involved then this is not news. If they are managing the media, it means the media is not getting the news out of them. I am an old fashioned journalist and my own feeling is that if the story arises out of a press release or a media release then it is not news (A journalist from the *Australian*)

These aspects of journalistic work are relevant to many other areas. It is now important to see how journalists understand their particular roles in relation to bushfire reporting. The different types of media that they work in and the particular media organisations they are part of, clearly have an effect on their relationship with fire agencies and how they understand their position and role in relation to bushfire reporting.

## **WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF THE MEDIA IN REPORTING BUSHFIRES?**

Ultimately, news organisations send journalists out to cover the news. That has to be the primary consideration. Clearly, that in itself can be very helpful, like in mapping or providing information that is always limited. It is not that journalists don't want to be involved in rescue and relief operations but that is not our role is it? We are there to inform the public about what is happening and do it in a responsible way. We are not going to go around trying to endanger peoples' lives, or put people at risk by covering stories, but we are there to cover the news. We are there to cover the story. We are not there to participate in mop up or relief operations. Of course, we have to be compassionate but we are reporters, we are not aid workers, we are not welfare workers, we are not medical doctors or nurses. (A journalist from the *Age*)

'Covering the news' or 'telling the story' is one aspect of journalistic work that may lead to a conflict between the fire agencies' goals and those of the journalists and the media organisations they work for. In a seminar held at the Australian Counter Disaster College (ACDC) in 1979, an attempt was made to come up with a set of management guidelines for the media in order to regulate the relations between the media and the emergency organisations. The overall aim of the seminar was to find ways in which, in the case of radio broadcasting, 'radio should function as the communication arm of the State Emergency Services' (ACDC, p.22). The call for

media management guidelines seems to demonstrate the approach to emergency media management at the time. Some of these ideas are re-emerging at present in the call to establish formalised non-exclusive agreements with the ABC and other commercial radio stations and local media (Bushfire COAG Report, Recommendation 7.1). One of the participants in the seminar in 1979 was Henry Mayer, a prominent figure of communications scholarship in Australia. Reading the report it is clear that Mayer's presentation caused quite a stir during the workshop. He seemed to challenge the overall aim of the seminar by insisting that there is an internal conflict between the media and the emergency services.

Media and authorities are in a permanent and inevitable conflict which springs from their respective roles: for SES the disaster is the focus and its total mastery is the main job and any media aspects are but a marginal means to an end. For the media disasters are just a type of news, one of many, SES are authorities which must be criticised just like any other (ACDC, p. 32).

Mayer indicates that there is a conflict (due to different values) between the demand for clear and 'rational' explanations and that of 'confusion' rumours and uncertainty that are typical of disasters and the media operation during such events. From Mayer's perspective, 'Media, as such, are anti-government authority and are hence anti-disaster authority. They side with 'the people' against 'the bureaucrats' (ACDC, p. 44, original emphasis). He calls for emergency organisations to realise the positive role of confusion and uncertainty (ACDC, p. 34) and argues that guidelines will never work, as media people will criticise them or may simply ignore them (ACDC, p.40). Guidelines, therefore, may look good but cannot really change the behaviour of broadcasters in mass emergencies.

The attention which media devote to a disaster will not be determined by the criteria of the agency or authority but by those of the media with possibly some minor concessions. The time of the disaster; the cost of getting there; the presence of stringers or network arrangements; the sort and amount of property destroyed; the question of who and how many got killed, wether they have 'prominence' in terms of news value - all these will influence the coverage. (ACDC, p.41)

Mayer acknowledges that his paper upset many other participants in the seminar. He explains that it is the emergency agencies that need to change and that they should not assume that they can somehow (for example by using guidelines) change the

media. He also explains that conflict will not be as strong at the moment of impact but will emerge very soon after the initial disaster.

The notion of conflict with fire agencies identified by Mayer emerges in the interviews in the context of attempts by fire agencies to control or limit journalists' access to incidents or stories. But it is also interesting to note that there are other contexts in which journalists actually see it as their role to inform and educate the public about risks and mitigation strategies. One journalist reflected on how she understood the importance of the media in relation to bushfires by noting:

The media is terribly important, it is important to inform people of what is going on. In the case of a newspaper it is almost always after the effect. For example, I recently wrote a story about bushfires in the Eyre Peninsula. What I did was, just before Christmas, I knew that we were heading for the fire seasons, so I did an interview with somebody from the CRC<sup>5</sup> about bushfires and about public risk and how people behave in bushfires. I write about bushfires a lot and I am really interested in the issue of reaching people and how people respond. He talked to me about the 'stay and go' policy. I did that interview deliberately knowing that there would be a crisis and I wanted to have it ready to go.

As a result of what had happened on Eyre Peninsula, where most people who got killed were in cars, the most tragic case was of a woman and her two children who died after fleeing the fire but her house actually survived it.

So in this case I was able to explain the stay and go policy and do a little box with a list of what you do in a bushfire, decide you want to go and if so go early, or if you want to stay this is what you have to do. I was really pleased to do that but the problem with that sort of thing is that you are doing it after the fact; you are doing it the day after because that's how news works. It only becomes news because there has been a bushfire and fatalities. I try to do my best to make it as clear as possible and really hope that people will read it, remember that and take that on board if they encounter fire in their own locality. (A journalist from the *Australian*)

Such an approach is far from the popular image of the media as purely sensationalising fires or being interested in the dramatic aspects of fires alone. It also indicates that the customary reference to 'the media' is far too general and does not acknowledge the difference between different media (radio, television, print and new media) and different media organisations (commercial, governmental, communal,

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<sup>5</sup> The reference here is to the Bushfire CRC that was established in 2003 under the Commonwealth Government's Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) Programme, the organisation funding the Bushfires and the Media research project.

urban, local) Clearly, particular media organisations and the individual journalists who work for these organisations shape the type of reporting, interest and depth they will dedicate to any particular topic.

The sort of features I write [about bushfire] would not appear in most newspapers. The *Australian* is a national newspaper; it is a serious newspaper, so you are able to go into some sort of depth. Other newspapers are not like that. There is, for example, a culture of blame in most newspapers. It is always 'whose fault is it?' This is something I am not at all comfortable with. The problem is that blame is just one of these big news values in Australia. Now, when you are looking at something like bushfires, and the bottom line with bushfires is that once they get to a certain size and if there is a certain fuel load there is nothing anybody can do about it, it is very hard to feed into that context if it's always seen as somebody's fault. Bushfires are beyond human control and it is hard to get that through to city people who think that everything that happens should be somebody's responsibility. (A journalist from the *Australian*)

The reference to other newspapers and the culture of blame is extremely important. Furthermore, such a distinction indicates that it is important to acknowledge the differences between various media organisations' style of reporting and understanding the reasons for such differences. Such an understanding is important for fire and emergency agencies in developing better 'media relations' and in addressing or responding properly to demands posed by different media.<sup>6</sup> This is how an interviewee from 774 ABC Melbourne, argues for a distinction between different media and in fact between different programs in relation to bushfire reporting.

I don't think television or newspapers have any role to play whatsoever [in reporting about ongoing incidents], it's only radio. It's a business of saying to people there is a fire going on and this is how you need to respond. What I find all the time is that the emergency services say, all the media is in there together, and then they treat 'programs' in the same way that they treat 'news'. But they don't need to. Journalists try to get a news scoop, that's their job, but our job in making programs, which we take very seriously, is to help the community. Emergency services need to see that and come to us with specific types of information. They can do what they like with television news and the rest of the media but I think they ought to see local radio particularly, not Radio National, not classic FM or triple J,

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<sup>6</sup> This aspect is often addressed by agencies employing ex-journalists or media personnel in their media relations department. What such individuals bring to the agencies is knowledge and familiarity of different media organisations.

as a very specific target for the information about the fire, before it starts, when it starts and in the aftermath. (Journalist from 774 ABC Melbourne)

These comments indicate the importance of developing better understandings of the motives of different media organisations in reporting bushfires. The next section is dedicated to an examination of ABC Local Radio Victoria and presents an interesting example of the role a media organisation can play in relation to bushfire reporting and the development and distribution of community warning strategies.

## **A NEW APPROACH: PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND EMERGENCY ORGANISATIONS**

ABC Local Radio Victoria is the official emergency channel in Victoria. The organisation signed a Memorandum of Understanding with all of Victoria's Emergency Services' Organisations. Even prior to this official agreement, this local radio network played an important role before and during bushfires by reporting specific community warnings. Interestingly, the initiative for this particular relationship emerged from the ABC itself.

In 1996 and 1997 I began building a relationship with the CFA. This was done to ensure that we provide the listeners of ABC radio with information that would help them prepare adequately for a bushfire season. The aim was also to help us know better the CFA, so that in the event of a fire, not only could we cover it from a news perspective: who, what, when, where and why?, but actually build a link of great integrity to the listeners. This is due to our better understanding of these organisations and also of what a fire does.

We incorporated this knowledge in our training. All the presenters and senior producers now get trained by the CFA in how to deal with fire at a fire ground. Even though it is likely that none of them will ever see a fire, it helped us in building in the information and understanding of the equipment, the jargon and fire behaviour in the context of bushfires.

That works very well. Building those relationships is essential for quality coverage. When fire happens the CFA and other emergency services trust us. They can trust us because we understand them, we know the pressure they are under and if you build a high level of trust than almost anything is possible. The communication to the listener is very good. (Journalist from 774 ABC Melbourne)

The motivation for the Memorandum of Understanding is not merely for developing better collaboration with the fire agencies but rather by a desire to be relevant to, and

to meet the perceived needs of listeners. This encouraged the radio station to develop a particular approach to bushfire reporting. In addition to specifically designed staff training, station management developed a set of internal regulations and procedures and practices that were designed to provide its listeners with information about specific risks and to deliver timely warnings during the onset of a bushfire.

From a local radio point of view we no longer see bushfires as 'a good bushfire story'. They are bad news because peoples' lives are threatened; their livelihoods and their properties are threatened. We take bushfires very seriously. There is no salivating at local radio when there is a fire. But what there is, is a real commitment and desire to deliver the information to the listeners and to help them through that moment.

From the beginning, our people take fires seriously. We take fire preparations seriously; funding seriously; education campaigns seriously; and we cover these issues constantly before the fires. A second element is when there is a fire. We instruct our broadcasters to tone-down their voice. We do not get excited about fire on ABC radio in Victoria. That would send a sense of panic and we don't want panic. What we are doing here is working with the emergency services saying to the listeners you can cope with this if you are well prepared, you can cope, rather than it is all going up in smoke.

During the 2003 fires our broadcasters were given specific instructions: keep the tone calm, keep it collected, play a track, go a way from it for a bit this is not world war III. (Journalist from 774 ABC Melbourne)

From the ABC perspective, different radio programs broadcast by the organisation will have different relationships with their listeners as well as with the fire agencies. These different sets of relations may also place special demands on the fire agencies and the information that they deliver to stations.

Our news and current affairs people, in a sense, have no regard for the listeners. Their concern is the news bulletin. They get frustrated because they don't work to build levels of trust with emergency organisations and to large extent still mistrust them. In contrast, our programs, like other media, rely on the most up to date news they can get, but do so in order to be accurate and build integrity with listeners.

The CFA, and any other organisations with volunteers, struggle to get the people on the ground to understand how important accuracy is. As soon as you miss out on the level of accuracy that you need to build the integrity, it goes for a long time. We are trying to convince the listeners that sometimes these organisations will make mistakes and it's not the end of the world, it doesn't mean that we made a mistake deliberately or maliciously. (Journalist from 774 ABC Melbourne)

Furthermore, ABC Local Radio Victoria points to the difference between their normal broadcasting and their emergency broadcasting. There is a conscious change in approach away from general programs to programs which are available to give specific and detailed information to listeners to enable them to respond properly to the emergency.

Ratings materials of the ABC summer broadcasting (two last weeks of January and first two weeks of February 2006) highlight the fact that this kind of broadcasting attracts large number of listeners.

The cumulative audience (total number of individual listeners tuning in at least once a week) for 774 ABC Melbourne during the 2002/3 fires and the cumulative audience for the 2006 fire coverage on 774 ABC Melbourne for the period was nearly 900,000, an increase of 100,000 over the station's normal average total audience each week. This was a quarter of all available listeners for those periods, an increase of 20 percent. (A Manager, ABC Local Radio, Victoria)

Clearly such data can be read in different ways. While it clearly indicates that media coverage of a disaster, such as the one provided by the ABC, will attract large numbers of listeners and might encourage other broadcasters to develop similar coverage, it is not so clear how relevant such coverage is for the individuals and communities directly affected by the fires. It is also possible that Fire agencies are likely to have mixed feelings about the extent of such media involvement in the event.

Fire information still has the effect of 'firing' everyone up, gluing them to the radio or television, whether they need to know or not-so fire still continues to be darn fine entertainment for the masses. In light of the fires in January, as I observed from a distance, things have changed dramatically in the relationship between at least ABC radio and the fire agencies. I'll be interested to see if future research will show that it is all for the better! (DSE, staff member)

The above example indicates that a different set of relationships with the media is possible. Clearly, such an arrangement does not entail that the radio network would become 'the communication arm of the Emergency Services', far from it. It is likely that in some cases the network may be highly critical of a particular organisation, its performance or conduct in relation to policies or specific incidents. Furthermore, it is likely that some tensions surrounding such reporting may emerge.



This case study demonstrates that a media organisation can develop enough knowledge and understanding of bushfires and emergency organisations so that its coverage of the events becomes part of the event itself. Yet, it is important to remember, as indicated by a CFA staff member, that the particular working relationship with the ABC described earlier may not reflect what other media might do. There is always a possible risk that the network which has a strong relationship with emergency service organisations might actually discourage others media attempting to develop an equally close working relationship.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The aim of this report is to present the views of journalists and media organisations in relation to bushfire reporting. It is important for emergency personnel and fire agencies to understand the needs of media personnel and their employers and their 'ways of working' rather than perceiving the involvement of the media as an annoyance. It is also important for fire agencies to realise the complexity of the situation and to respect the differences between different media organisations. Such knowledge needs to be integrated into the agencies in ongoing as well as emergency related, interaction with the media.

I don't see my role as that of working in conjunction with emergency organisations. Of course, I will interview them or whatever, I'll be fair and so on. After all they are one of the many sources you go to in constructing the story. But usually, when you are going to an aftermath type of thing, it is usually your own observations as well and the people you speak to in the context of exploration of the topic.

Certain types of the press are probably more sensational than others. The media is not one amorphous beast. There are different parts of us. So it is not necessarily about one united group plotting in the corner together. We don't set out to deride emergency services. (A journalist from the *Age*)

Better working relationships and integration of media organisations as 'partners' in the emergency situation are not only possible, as the case of the ABC demonstrates, they are also essential. As the world becomes more and more connected, natural disasters, locally or in far away places, become significant media events. It is certain that bushfires will continue to generate media interest and that we may find more and more media organisations dedicating time and resources to cover such stories. At the same time, this report indicates, generalisations about 'the media' and their treatment

of bushfires are not very helpful. The diversity of media organisations, their audiences and their relationship with different fire agencies, mean that attempts to develop comprehensive media management practices are not going to be very effective. It is also clear that aggressive 'public relation' strategies are not necessarily going to generate better relations with the media, as these may often be perceived by journalists as attempts at control and a desire to manufacture stories.

There is a need to distinguish between the educative function of the media and the other diverse needs of different media organisations. The example of ABC Local Radio Victoria indicates that a media organisation can become an important institution in the context of bushfires.

As we finish writing this report large fires erupt in the Grampians and many other parts of Victoria. The media coverage of these multiple incidents is yet to be fully analysed. However, even at this early stage it seems that the ongoing reporting and warnings broadcast by ABC Local Radio Victoria were highly appreciated both by the audience and the Victorian fire agencies on the ground. Such collaboration worked to the benefit of the threatened communities, the fire agencies and the radio network. It is an example of a media organisation and fire agencies, which while operating from different interests and from different motives, may still complement each other to the benefit of the communities under threat.

Our future research project will look at the different ways the information broadcast on the radio during incidents, such as Grampians fires, is used and understood by the people affected by the fires. This issue is of significance to emergency organisations and to media organisations, such as the ABC, given that those broadcasts will be heard by people with a direct need to know what is happening and by a large number of people who may not be directly affected by the fires

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