



## BUSHFIRES AND THE MEDIA

REPORT NO: 2

# The Media and Fire Services - Public relations and community information: A Victorian view

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# The Media and Fire Services – Public relations and community information: A Victorian view

## SUMMARY

This report looks at a particular aspect of the relationship between Victorian fire services and the media in the context of bushfires<sup>1</sup>. It explores different approaches adopted by fire services in dealing with the media before, during and after fires. The report identifies a tension that exists between the aim of agencies to use the media for promoting and managing their public image and their use of the media as a tool for delivering warnings to targeted communities at risk during incidents.

The media are important institutions where meaning, information and knowledge about bushfires are produced. The aim of this report is to better understand the working relations between different media organisations and fire agencies. This study revealed that from the Victorian fire services' perspective relations with the media are far from simple or consistent. The key issues which emerged were:

1. Concerns about the media impact on an organisation's public image or brand name.
2. How the media can be involved in the effective dissemination of warnings to individuals and communities in affected areas during disasters.

It is suggested that emergency organisations might gain some benefit from debriefing journalists at the conclusion of a major incident or the fire season to gain insights into how journalists perceive their interactions with the agency. The results of such research could be used to modify procedures and enhance the relationships between media and emergency organisations.

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<sup>1</sup> Fire agencies began recently to adopt the term *wildfire* as a generic international term. In the report we use the more common term *Bushfire* that has a particular cultural significance in Australia. This is also the term most commonly used by the media and the larger public in describing the fires.

## INTRODUCTION

My observation is that some people view the media as a means of self-promotion. Some see them as the only way of getting information out and some see them as a problem ... (DSE Staff Member<sup>2</sup>).

This first stage of the Bushfires and the Media Project examines the relationship between fire agencies and the media. The report deals with perceptions of the role of the media in emergency situations. Particular attention is given to views of the public relations role of the media on the one hand and the information dissemination role on the other. Two sets of stakeholders' views were considered: 1. fire services - The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and the Country Fire Authority (CFA), 2. journalists and radio broadcasters.

Concerns about how bushfires are portrayed in the media are not new. Fire services, and researchers alike, argued that the media depiction of such events tend to dramatise and sensationalise bushfires as 'disasters' that may result in exposing the public to avoidable risk. Irresponsible sensationalist reporting may, for example, cause people to try to flee a fire when it is too late to do so. On the other hand, uninformed reporting or lack of media interest in fires may result in the public not being prepared or even unaware of the risk or what actions to take when fire strikes. The fear is that media coverage and their treatment of the topic of bushfires may run counter to the goals of emergency organisations. While in the past this has resulted in suspicions of the media, in recent years, fire agencies acknowledge that they need to work collaboratively with the media to try and solve such issues.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted during the latter part of the 2004 fire season with five journalists, two radio broadcasters and six emergency personnel from two different fire services in Victoria (the DSE and the CFA). In addition, two

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<sup>2</sup> In order to protect the identity of the interviewees they are identified by their institutional affiliation alone. The journalists interviewed reported and wrote about bushfire incidents. The people interviewed from the fire agencies are individuals who carried out various roles working with the media.

sets of observations took place during total fire ban days at the CFA's State Coordination Centre. These enabled us to observe how the CFA's Information Unit liaises with media organisations to disseminate community warnings and other relevant information to the public during ongoing incidents.

The interviews were coded with reference to information about relations between the emergency organisations and the media in the context of bushfire incidents. Although the findings of this exploratory study cannot be easily generalised beyond the two Victorian organisations which were studied, they suggest issues relevant to other emergency and media organisations in relation to bushfires and bushfires management in Australia.

## **1. MANAGING MEDIA IMAGES- THE PROCESS**

### **EMERGENCY SERVICE PERSPECTIVES**

The fire services' view of the media is far from being unified. Different approaches to the media were often articulated by interviewees as the 'old approach' versus newer and more collaborative approaches to the media. Accordingly, the 'old approach' is about suspicion of the media. This culture is reported to be disappearing from the agencies. The other approach is that of public relations driven professionals whose view of the media is that a public relations' approach is the best way to promote and protect the organisation's public profile. Such a view entails a centralised, corporate media management plan. A third view is an information-flow model that places the emphasis on rapid dissemination of information to the public during incidents. Such an approach views the media as an effective tool for delivering specific warnings and facts (rather than 'spin' or institutionally self-serving messages) about the fires to the public. This later model argues that a decentralised media management system is the most effective way to deliver rapid and accurate information to the public during incidents.

According to Len Foster<sup>3</sup> the Chief Executive Officer of the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, and Chairman of the Country Fire Authority Victoria, emergency services in Australia in the past were generally insular and parochial organisations. The paramilitary and hierarchical nature of such services, he argues, meant that for many years they were very resistant to change. Yet the media, according to Len Foster, are important drivers for change in the emergency organisations around Australia. For instance, talkback radio is one mechanism whereby even small incidents in which the organisation has performed badly gain wide publicity and force the organisation to react. In such a case, media and community expectations intersect to bring about change. Furthermore, intense legal scrutiny forced emergency organisations over the last five to ten years to become more accountable and drastically change the way in which they operate. The new environment of greater media and community expectations, according to Len Foster, means that fire agencies need to embrace the media as partners.

Len Foster has noted that:

The media can be a terrible enemy but it can also be a huge asset in protecting the agency, or the emergency service, but also in communicating with the public. Today at the start of the fire season, we take twenty to thirty journalists and put them through minimum skill training and prepare them for what they are going to experience on the fire ground. They then become a significant asset to communicate successfully with the community rather than being a liability. In terms of a changed attitude, if something is wrong and if we don't engage the media they'll cut us into pieces. There are many examples where we hadn't done that successfully to the detriment of the organisation and where the media has actually driven the change process in our agencies.<sup>4</sup>

One of the interviewees argued that while media criticism may lead to change it also has a potential to further contribute to a defensive attitude and suspicion of media motives.

After the Alpine fire we got attacked by the media right left and centre, so a lot of people in fire feel that they have been hit too many times and

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<sup>3</sup> *Likely developments in wildfire suppression and management over the next ten years, indicating the type of research activity needed to sustain and inform such developments.* Lecture presented at La Trobe University, 1 June, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

anything to do with the media they go 'oh God here we bloody go again.'  
(DSE Staff Member)

This aspect of the relationship with the media means that most emergency organisations nowadays actively engage with the media. Most have public relations and media departments that are both reactive *and* proactive in promoting the organisation's 'brand name' and in managing community and public expectations via the media. While there are obvious variations in the different agencies' policies, intensity, and how they deal with the media, these aspects of the relationship with the media are well established. How public relations or media departments operate in promoting the organisation's public profile, goals and operations was outlined by one of the interviewees.

During the fire season my role is primarily about how we respond to fire. Say it was January and we didn't have a fire going I will be working with media trying to get them to do stories about how we respond to fires. If we have new technologies or new equipment I will try to push that and in doing so create the department profile with the media and the public. During summer when we are not fighting a fire I will try to get a run for positive stories. When we are fighting a fire it is all about getting messages out about how we are fighting the fire and messages we need to get to the community and so forth. So there is the preparation side of it and during fire seasons there are always two roles to our work one is proactive media [relations] and the other is reactive media [relations]. (DSE Staff Member)

According to the interviewees from the fire agencies, a good public relations strategy needs to promote the organisation's goals in any given season in the prevailing social and political environment. During the summer, the activities of the public relations department are different from department's activities during the winter. It is also clear that there are important distinctions between the proactive and reactive aspects of such work.

The need for trained personnel to deal with the media was articulated by many of the interviewees.

Basically, anyone who talks to the media can be asked policy questions. If all the questions are strictly about the fire then most of the state fire coordinators will be OK to answer it. But every so often the questions can turn a bit more into policy questions: Do you have enough staff? Have you done enough fuel reduction burning? Are you trained well enough? And as soon as it gets off on to that track you need someone who can handle the media. It is not a case of putting an angle or a spin on it. It is actually the case of having someone who is confident enough with the media to

actually talk about and to enter into other areas. Even if you get someone and the information is exactly the same, if they are not very confident with the media they get chewed up and spat out by some of the radio presenters. (DSE Staff Member)

The same issue was raised by another interviewee who argued that there is a need for internal organization training in order to change negative attitudes toward the media.

Part of my role is teaching our guys how to actually work with the media and getting them to realise that the media are not our enemy. The media are one of the most important tools that we have especially in a fire situation, but actually all the way through. The quickest way to get people to know where fire is, is through the media. The quickest way to get people to understand what you're doing to put out a fire is through the media. The quickest way for us to get damaged is also through the media. Getting people to understand the media is to explain that while they may not always be an ally they are a very useful tool rather than an enemy. (DSE Staff Member)

Gaining such an understanding and control over relations with the media requires a centralised approach to the organisation's media relations. While the DSE is able to centralise and compartmentalise its public communications, the nature of an organisation like the CFA, which is supported by large numbers of volunteers, makes such a centralised media management practice almost impossible to maintain. This point was raised by a CFA fire-fighter volunteer:

The CFA in the past decade placed an enormous importance on dealing with the media and there has been acceptance within the organisation that the media is one of their tools, particularly in communicating risk to communities. Head office has a media relations section and strategies and stuff that are designed to achieve their aims. But when you go down the lower food chain of the local brigade level you'll see that some fire captains and fire fighters have embraced that idea and others far less. There is no way to enforce it. Most brigades would have a policy internally about who talks to the media, but the nature of volunteers mean that you cannot really control them or discipline them. From my experience it is not a real problem and the organisation tends to ignore it. If volunteers ignore Head office instructions, well, they tend to roll over it because that's the nature of volunteers. You can discipline volunteers up to a point and then you part company. (CFA volunteer)

The complex balancing act required to manage the media effectively is well described by the CFA staff member who said:

I do not think the media is our friend but I do not think the media is our enemy as well. The media also have a number of responsibilities to public

information and to various lines of inquiries which this organisation [CFA] would not like to follow. There is an ethical responsibility on journalists to pursue the truth even when it is uncomfortable to organisations like this. I think that means that it is quite important that the relationship between emergency services and the media is never one of friendships. Because they are going to have to really give us a good poke on a couple of issues. So they cannot be our friend. They can be a colleague, they can be supportive, they can understand our issue but they have to challenge us, that's their job. So when people say a lot of the time that the media is our friend it gives a false impression that you can bring the media to a point where they will do what we want them to do. The day that happens, we are in a lot of trouble as a democracy. It is not the role of the media to do what emergency services want them to do.

Does that mean the media is our enemy? No, not at all. We have to collaborate, we have to communicate but if you think about this in terms of control and influence, we have no control on this relationship only influence. It is a very dynamic relationship and it has to be that way. That is the relationship I look for. I don't know if this is where emergency services are, maybe a couple of people, but we have to understand that the media have multiple roles and that I hope when issues arises we are in a collaborative mode, crucify me later, I am happy to deal with issues and questions later, but no amount of friendship would stop the media asking those questions nor should it. (CFA Staff Member)

Ongoing challenges which emerge include: the need to balance integrity of safety information; public relations issues; diverse media interests and ethics with respect to reporting; good relationships with, and appropriate distance from, journalists.

## JOURNALISTS' PERSPECTIVES

A perception that the CFA runs its public relations campaigns and media relations activities are far better than the DSE emerges from the interviews with media personnel. The very same organisational priorities and practices regarding managing communication that emergency services personnel believe best serve their organisations' interests are those features experienced as obstacles by journalists. Some journalists argued that they find it very difficult to work with the DSE because, unlike the CFA, the Department is overly protective and does not open itself up to media scrutiny.

The CFA seems to work with the media a lot better than the DSE. The DSE has this sort of governmental bureaucratic approach - these are the procedures this is how it works! The CFA is much more pragmatic, it is living in the real world. They've got a disaster coming, they know that the media are doing what media does, which is go to where the trouble is to



report on it. So they work with you on that. They understand the reality of the media a lot better. I think they simply have more experience than the DSE. (A journalist from the Age)

Another journalist from the same newspaper argues that it is the DSE's attempt to promote or protect their organisation which puts them at odds with the media.

The organisation's public image is one of the main issues for the DSE and it is partly their own fault. If they were better at managing the messages that went out about things like the recent Wilsons Promontory fire they wouldn't have such a problem. Instead, they take a defensive position and therefore they are on the back foot. ... It's not that long ago that the CFA had a similar public image problem. There were public perceptions that the CFA volunteers sit around and drink beer and that if a fire started it was probably a CFA volunteer that had started it. (A journalist from the Age)

Predictably, any suggestion of fire agencies using 'spin' was viewed negatively by journalists.

We live in a world of public relations and media people who, on paper, their job is to assist the media but what we find a lot of the time is that their job is to actually stop us from doing what we need to do. If I am in a fire my job is to go out and report that fire as accurately as I can and I will not let anything stop me from doing that. (A journalist from the Age)

The controversy surrounding the Wilsons Promontory fire of April 1, 2005 exemplified these issues. The fire had burned approximately 6200 hectares by April 12. Initially the fire had been lit as part of a planned fuel reduction burn. Yet, once the fire had 'escaped', it was presented and interpreted in the popular media as a disaster. The DSE was directly blamed by the media for destroying the park.

The Prom fire was the worst situation I have been involved in. It had everything for a bad media story. It started through a fuel reduction burn that the DSE had been conducting eleven days before. It involved the evacuation of 600 people. First and foremost, the Prom is Victoria's most loved national park, it is a favorite playground in Victoria. Number two it was school holidays. Number three, it closed the park down for the whole school holiday. Four, it involved evacuation. Five, it started through one of our burns. So the media have jumped all over us. Reporting the fire was one side of things but the other side was putting their boots into us, looking for blame and that sort of thing. I cannot think of many more difficult situations than that one. (DSE Staff Member)

Despite this rather damaging media coverage a journalist who in the past had very negative experiences with the DSE found that their personnel were very accessible after the Prom incident.

I have just come out of the Wilsons Prom fire and their attitude to the media is a complete turnaround. They couldn't have done enough for us. You could feel that there was a shift in the way that they were looking at the media. They weren't looking at us as if we were their enemy. It was like 'OK, these people are here they have their job to do just as we have our job and instead of treating them like enemies we should work with them'. And they did just that over a four day period. They choppered us into the fire zone and flew us out and they couldn't have done enough for us. So I thought this was an amazing 180° turn from what I had experienced in 2003 and hopefully that relationship will continue. (A journalist from the *Age*)

Interestingly, a report by the Emergency Services Commissioner, Bruce Esplin, about the Wilsons Promontory bushfires indicates that the DSE did not follow its own policies for prescribed burns when they started the fire.<sup>5</sup> The response from another *Age* journalist to this report was that this demonstrates that the DSE was in fact manipulating the media during the event but was 'caught out doing it', suggesting that the negative and critical media treatment of the DSE was correct. According to this journalist, the DSE was manipulating the media on one front, while facilitating media access to the fire so that journalists and photographers could generate 'great pictures' but had to guess the 'real story'.<sup>6</sup>

I think they had learned how to manipulate us more subtly. They now seem to know that we have tight deadlines and that it is difficult to check the veracity of what they say in just a few hours ... this is an interesting place they have come to. (A journalist from the *Age*)

Another interviewee from the DSE agreed that in the past they had had problems with the media but argued that the DSE's relations with the media had improved dramatically in recent years. He noted that:

Nowadays, we work a lot better with the media. We're a lot quicker in getting information to the media so therefore the media starts to respect us. Because I used to be a journalist I know the realities of a journalist's deadline and if you stuff them around with deadlines you lose their respect and they don't come back to you. Things are improving quite a lot. We are

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<sup>5</sup> The full report is available on the DSE website.  
(<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/dsencor.nsf/LinkView/4DA3D897FFF20945CA2570AB0004391F367C6DC07DF8F640CA2570AB000DEC20>)

<sup>6</sup> The Esplin report on the Wilsons Promontory fire recommend that DSE coordinate better their public information and their communication with the media in relation to prescribe burns but it does not rise the possibility or find any evidence of a 'cover up' in relation to the Wilsons Promontory Fires.

more responsive to their needs which mean that they respect us more and I am trying to get our people to respect the media more. (DSE Staff Member)

## **2. MANAGING MEDIA IMAGES: OUTCOMES FOR DSE AND CFA**

DSE personnel interviewed believed that the CFA has developed a better public image than the DSE and that overall it seems to work better with the media. One DSE staffer noted that:

I think the media probably thinks that the CFA is better in working with them than we are. The CFA is also probably geared better toward the promotion of the CFA and rightly so. They've got many volunteers and you definitely see more yellow overalls than you do green overalls. I think this encouraged us to lift our own game and get our messages out to the community. The other thing is that the DSE is usually in the back country and the CFA is usually around protecting residents and property and so it is easier for the media to get good pictures of the protection of houses. There is a lot of work behind the scenes that the media and the community simply do not understand. (DSE Staff Member)

The different structure and culture of the CFA and DSE were identified as factors that might contribute to them being perceived differently both by the media and the public. For instance, the CFA operates as both a government authority and a volunteer based organisation. But it is not perceived by the public and the media as part of the 'government' but rather as a community-based organisation.

We don't have quite the same pressures on us. Even if houses burn it is often blamed on the fire. I don't think I can ever recall the CFA being blamed for houses burning down. Individual volunteer fire fighters are the face of the CFA and the media is just not going to blame them. A few times I recall volunteers being disillusioned and criticising the CFA and Head office and the media taking the volunteers side against the CFA but none of these have been big issues. When five CFA volunteer fire fighters died at Linton a few years ago, media coverage of this tragedy was fairly critical of the CFA but it wasn't critical of the individuals involved. So we are pretty protected from that. Where as the DSE cop it because they're government and a bureaucracy. Anything that goes wrong you can blame the government for and everyone will believe you. (CFA Staff Member)

Some DSE personnel interviewed believed this was one of the main reasons the media were far more critical of the Department.

All organisations make mistakes but the problem that we have got is that because we are government, when we make mistakes everyone [in the media] put their boots in. Where as the CFA, because it is not government but volunteer based, have a much much much better approval rate than we ever would, and this is quite frustrating. (DSE Staff Member)

Furthermore, it is possible that the different roles and bases of the two organisations contribute to differential treatment by the media.

One of the big problems is that most major fires are a joint activity between CFA and DSE and I think it would be fair to say that they have, or we have quite different priorities at times. There have certainly been cases when we have been trying to get information to the community about a fire that they [DSE] are responsible for but they [DSE] do not want to put that information out because it reflects badly on them. They do all the fuel reduction burning, so if a fire escapes, or poses a problem they tend to do a lot of spin and public relations and they have a very media focused response. For them it is more about their profile, whereas for us it is more about giving information to the community. (CFA Staff Member)

But as one of the interviewees from the DSE explains, the problem is not that of 'spin' or an attempt to protect the organisation but rather a need to authorise the information before they release it to the public.

From the DSE the media gets information that is accurate but not as timely as they would like and from the CFA they get information that is more timely but not as accurate. The reason I say this, and this is not a criticism of the CFA, is because the CFA has many volunteers who all have their radios and digital phones, they are often locals and they ring in and say the fire has reached that or this place. Then the media call me to ask me about it and I say that I do not have this information confirmed. It should be a coordinated single agency approach but occasionally information gets out and people ring the media from the CFA, not through the organisations, they just go live to air and begin reporting where the fire is and all that. Then the media speak to me and I haven't heard it and all I can say is that I cannot confirm that. The official information comes from one channel but there is nothing to stop the media from speaking to CFA volunteers as independent persons. (DSE Staff Member)

The distinction between the two organisations has often become part of the way in which the media frame the story of a fire gone bad.

The media do it all the time [playing one agency off against the other]. They did it on radio last Tuesday saying that in the Wilsons Promontory fires the DSE had abandoned the CFA at a particular time in the fire and that we didn't give them any assistance. They write stories that the CFA are always left to chase our 'burns' that escape. There is a particular radio announcer who loves trying to put a wedge between the CFA and the DSE and playing one organisation off against the other. It doesn't happen all

the time but it will happen when they start getting sick of 'this is what the fire is doing'- they are running out of interesting stories- so they have to think of new ones. There were reports, for example, last week supposedly about tensions between the CFA and the DSE. There was a person who rang up talkback radio with stories saying there were issues on the fire lines. So that particular radio station actually rang all the local brigades purely to find such stories, stories that show that there were difficulties between the DSE and the CFA. (DSE Staff Member)

Conflict provides a very common framework for media stories. In the case of the DSE and the CFA, past tensions may have provided some basis for these kinds of reports.

There is some historical tension between the two organisations but overall the two organisations work better than they ever have and they are getting closer and closer in the way they operate which is good. (DSE Staff Member)

Finally, media access to local residents and volunteers means such inter-agency issues may continue to be reported in the media. It is also possible that the different interests and agendas of stakeholders such as local residents or different groups such as environmentalists, farmers and pastoralists, fire-fighters, public land managers and scientists will mean divergent views are bound to be reported.

Clearly, the differences between these two organisations help to create different relationships with the media. Such differences may also have implications for the ways the media view each organisation. Organisational differences might explain how different kinds of information that is communicated reaches the media and the public during the bushfires.

### **3. THE MEDIA AND COMMUNITY WARNINGS**

Beyond the role of the media in promoting the public profile of the fire services, the media are perceived by both CFA and DSE personnel as an important 'tool' for delivering specific warnings during incidents. At the same time it seems this function has some implications for the organisations' public relations' approach and media management practices. This is expressed in the distinction made, both within the DSE and the CFA, between the 'information officer' versus that of the 'public relations' staffer.

Corporate media officers write stories from a corporate perspective. We are information officers and we deliberately call ourselves information

officers not media officers, because our purpose is the dissemination of information to more than just the media. So even though we look after the media, we also put information on our website and provide information to the Victorian Bushfire Information line. We send the information up the organisation to the Minister, to the Premier, across the Department and the community, and to other agencies. We are more than just media persons. That is why it is important to see ourselves as information officers where media is an important part but not the only part of what we do. (DSE Staff Member)

Emergency personnel were clear about the relative importance of spin and information dissemination, and the dangers of incorrect information being reported.

One DSE officer explained the issue in the following terms:

The need for controlling the information can be an issue of public image but I think it is more about the risk to create panic or concerns. I hear on the radio that a particular town is on fire when really it is ten kilometres away and in fact it is just someone's back fence that is burning. I mean the DSE has, everyone has an opinion in the papers about the DSE and what we do, but this image stuff, that's not the real issue. The real problem is the potential to create the wrong story in the eyes of the community that may be impacted by the fire. Communities need good, accurate safe information. If we are mucking around with their heads and saying things which are not true they will simply not trust the information that they are getting. (DSE Staff Member)

A similar point was presented by an interviewee from the CFA who argued that information should always be the main objective when talking about fires during incidents.

My priority is the fire that is posing threat to life and property and my objective is to move information that supports the adoption of an appropriate response. This means, to be quite blunt, that at times I am completely uninterested in the number of fire trucks we've got at a fire. I am far more interested in saying to the public to expect a wind change, what that means and what they should do about it. (CFA Staff Member)

Accordingly, moves toward information-based media relations are seen as a positive development. As one journalist who has written extensively about bushfires noted:

The premium [in the CFA] is being placed on the information. The penny finally dropped that getting accurate information to communities is much more important than saying 'we are out here and our brave volunteers are doing a great job'. So it is now about getting out real time and specific information about things that are going on as the main game. I don't know if from a CFA point of view there is a conflict between that and the public relations aspect. The reality is that the CFA as a brand, if you like, is gold at the moment and until something goes wrong they are trading on a lot of

beliefs and expectations and an understanding that if you were running a commercial organisation you would think this was fantastic. You've got volunteers, community based and high approval ratings; people appreciate their work and all that. So they've actually built quite a good brand. In that sense they don't actually need to do public relations to generate touchy feely responses. What they do need to do is make sure that people understand what is going on during bushfires so their brand doesn't suffer (A journalist from the *Age*)

The provision of such information is believed to enable the public to make informed decisions that are essential for the protection of life and property. Furthermore, the information flow model is part of 'The Australian Inter-service Incident Management System', or AIIMS, Incident Control System. This Incident Control System divides incident management into four distinct roles: The Incident Controller, who has the overall responsibility for managing a particular incident, including all information about the incident. The incident's Logistics, Operational and Planning roles all come under the direct authority of the Incident Controller. When the incident develops in size or complexity, the management function remains the same. This system may prove highly beneficial in generating a better communication flow between different agencies, across states and with the public and the media. It is within this context that the COAG inquiry discussed the use of a Standard Emergency Warning Signal during incidents and proposes that 'bushfire threat warnings' be conveyed consistently in all States and Territories (2005:152).<sup>7</sup>

It is also in this operational context that the CFA and DSE have established the Information Unit as part of the Planning section of the Incident Management Team during incidents. The Information Unit's objective is to deliver accurate and timely messages to the communities threatened by a particular fire and to encourage the residents to respond appropriately to the specific threats they are facing.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, this approach challenges the traditional 'Media Liaison' practices by claiming that the communication objective during an incident should not be to meet

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis, S., P. Kanowski, et al., 2005, *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*, Council of Australian Governments (COAG), p.152.

<sup>8</sup> Carson C., 2004, The Information Unit: effective information flow to the community at risk during the onset of wildfire in Victoria. *AFAC Conference- Are we prepared for future challenges?* Perth, Western Australia.

the needs of the media. 'Communication with the media is not an objective, but a tool for achieving the objective of reaching those at risk'.<sup>9</sup>

Observations of the CFA's Information Unit during incidents indicate that public relations personnel are well integrated into the unit. The fact that they have a media background enables them to understand the priorities of journalists and deliver the information to the media more effectively. While they work with prewritten safety messages and warnings, they are able to deliver these in ways that are responsive to the media needs and sensitivities. A similar practice is also adopted by the DSE's Information Unit. One staff member explained how this is done:

We have full time media support when we need it. We also monitor the media so that if something is happening we are on to that. I believe that we now understand better the importance of the media in the Department. We cannot just say that we are putting the fire out - I placed this banner up in the Emergency Coordination Centre: "Putting out information is as important as putting out the fire!" I would like people to really take that on board. We are starting to push that forward and this is something that has not ever been a top priority before. (DSE Staff Member)

It is in this context that radio more than any other medium is perceived to be the best means for delivering timely safety information.

During fires we view the media, particularly local ABC radio and local radio stations, as the most effective and the fastest way for us to get messages out to the community. Whether these joint messages with the CFA are about people needing to start to defend their homes or what clothing they should be wearing, if embers start landing, definitely radio is the most effective way and we see the media in this context as an ally. We couldn't do our job without them as far as the community safety aspect goes. The media may be viewed more negatively by the Department when the immediate threat has past. The fire has passed and we start getting criticism on our control or suppression techniques or prescribed burning programs, or about incidents that may have occurred during the fires. It is then that we find ourselves on the defensive (DSE Staff Member)

Interestingly, radio and in particular commercial talkback radio can also be the source of the most damaging media coverage for the agencies, both in relation to their profile and in relation to safety messages and community warnings. The immediacy

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, (2004:70).



and accessibility of radio, that makes it so effective in delivering safety messages, is also what makes it difficult to control and manage from a public relations perspective.

In a bushfire situation radio is the most important media because it reports where the fire is, what it is doing and community warnings. Television helps in that way as well if fire is coming through in the afternoon. Radio news is good, especially if it is used to broadcast live and instant warnings but when radio starts getting into the realm of talkback or when some presenters start coming up with their own opinions that's when radio is not as effective and that's when media can be a lot more destructive than the newsroom. (DSE Staff Member)

## **DISCUSSION**

Emergency organisations in Victoria have responded to the challenges and opportunities offered by the mass media in several ways. First, they have redefined the media as a *partner*. Strategies designed to promote this approach include providing training for media staff about fire behaviour and safety related issues on the fire ground. Journalists who take part in this training are issued with media passes. Emergency organisations also provide media liaison officers who escort journalists on the fire ground. In addition all emergency organisations in Victoria have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with ABC Local Radio Victoria, making this particular radio network Victoria's Official Emergency Services Broadcaster. In addition, emergency organisations have hired spokespersons and media staff with a journalism background and created a range of proactive media activities and comprehensive media plan. There has also been an attempt to develop the media skills and understandings of the media for a range of staff in the organisations.

In addition, most Victorian emergency organisations have developed strategies for managing and monitoring media messages. Where appropriate they have centralised the control of media messages and regularly monitor and assess their media performance through a review of the media coverage of their activities.

The position and structure of the DSE and the CFA influence their ability to create a particular public profile and their use of the media as an effective communications warning system. Media reporting and the organisation's public image are also important for internal reasons because media criticism may have the potential to

demoralise firefighters and volunteers who may feel they are not getting the credit they deserve.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR EMERGENCY ORGANISATIONS**

The above report is based on a Victorian view of the issue. It is possible that in other jurisdiction the picture will be quite different. Yet, given the significance of media coverage for emergency organisations, their staff, volunteers and the public it is likely that other emergency organisations might fruitfully devote resources to actively improve their relationships with the media. While it has become commonplace to monitor the content of media coverage, there could be some value in emergency organisations undertaking regular research into the way working journalists perceive their interactions with the organisation. Monitoring the relationship with the media could be based on a specific event such as a major fire where journalists who had worked on that fire could be debriefed. Alternatively, journalists could be surveyed at the end of the fire season. The results of such monitoring could be used to modify procedures and enhance the relationship between the media and the emergency organisations. Such activities may be carried out by specifically trained information officers who, as part of their ongoing role, would build effective working relationships with individual journalists and media organisations.