

Orange on the scene: the SES media officer program

Goodin and O'Neill examine the use of community-based media officers in the context of a structured media-management plan

Summary

One of the ongoing challenges in public education is how to manage the sudden, even overwhelming, media interest that is an inevitable part of a community crisis. The NSW State Emergency Service (SES) has developed an approach that puts them a jump ahead in getting the right information to the public at the right time. This paper examines the use of community-based media officers in the context of a structured media-management plan. It examines the rationale for appointing local-level media officers; the strengths and drawbacks of such an approach; the policies, training, procedures and resources that are part of its implementation; and what's next for the SES media officers' program.

Introduction

The 1999 Sydney hailstorm has proven to be a pivotal event in the development of the NSW SES as an organisation. One of the areas that this damaging and costly event highlighted was the close relationship between the media and the emergency services—whether people like it or not. The Deputy Director General of the NSW SES wrote not long after the event:

“Today the media spotlight is harsher than it has ever been, weaknesses or alleged weaknesses

are quickly discovered and misunderstandings of complex matters are broadcast as fact. These things being so, the management of the media must be given a high priority. If this is not done effectively the core business of the operation...can be derailed to the detriment of the victims of the disaster” (Keys 1999–2000).

The role and relative importance of local media per se has traditionally not received much scrutiny in the literature, which has tended to focus on how media coverage in general shapes public perception of disasters, or on ways the media contributes in a relatively broad sense to the warning and informing functions of emergency preparation and response. A number of recent studies and anecdotal accounts, however, have pointed out that there is, in fact, a unique and highly valuable role that locally targeted media activities can play in emergency management.

Retired BBC journalist John Jefferson, for example, wrote: “Although people...develop a bond with their favourite national newspaper or their preferred national radio programme ..., [they] are bound to appear more distant and less in touch than a local media dedicated to telling the daily story of their region” (Jefferson 1999). He also points out that “should a major incident occur, the locals will be first on the scene and although their principal purpose ought to be to serve their local audience they will also hold the fort for the nationals until reinforcements

arrive.” Moreover, “long after the national and international media circus has left town, the local media will continue to pursue a story and the issues it has raised. It will rumble on until the community itself signals it has read and heard enough” (ibid).

A report on perceptions of the 1998 California mudslides found that 74 percent of survey respondents cited local television as a source of information about the disaster, as opposed to 33 percent who mentioned national television. The authors concluded that “[r]espondents ... draw their information more widely than from a single newspaper, relying on local television and radio, as well as their own difficulties in a disaster” (Rodrigue et al. 1998).

The prominence of locally focused information has also been noted by researchers examining 1995 flooding, also in California. They theorise that:

“in a widespread disaster event, newspaper editors select a small number of locations out of those where significant damages exist to give special emphasis, often developing the personal stories of a small number of individuals victimized by the disaster ... Areas near the onset of the disaster are prone to receive disproportionate coverage. If a paper sends a reporter to the first town with a breached levee, that reporter is likely to continue filing stories from that same location for the duration of the disaster” (Dymon and Bascoe 1996).

They also note that specific locations with a “hook”, or some memorable characteristic, can receive disproportionate coverage. In other words, the local angle can and often does take precedence over the “big picture”.

Such localised information may be more effective from an emergency management perspective than the big picture. Research on a flood event in Puerto Rico in 1998 found that residents dismissed general flood-preparedness information in the media because the safety advice did not mention their area by name as vulnerable to flooding. “It never floods here, so we don’t have to pay attention” was the prevailing attitude (Perez-Lugo 1999).

In short, finding and making the most of the local angle in any story can ensure that safety and public-awareness messages get the coverage they need. Locally targeted stories are not only more appealing in many cases to the media, they are more effective in impressing on people the relevance of the information. Certainly, local media is only one aspect of an effective overall media strategy, but it can be a crucially important one—and it forms one of the key aspects of the media program of the NSW State Emergency Service.

The SES media program

The SES media strategy aims to increase public safety by:

- Enhancing public awareness of the identity, roles and activities of the SES. This improves “brand recognition” and makes the SES more attractive to the media as a source of news and safety information.
- Increasing awareness of SES members’ skills as highly trained, professional volunteers. This raises the SES’s credibility as a source of quality information for both the media and the public.
- Producing and disseminating storm and flood safety information that is both

genuinely useful and easy to follow. This includes information during the events themselves and information designed to help people prepare for them.

- Strengthening Units and Divisions by supporting their local recruitment, fundraising and community education activities, as well as their operational media activities.

In order to produce these results, the SES has developed a suite of documents and materials that give the entire media team – from the local Units through Divisions to State Headquarters – a consistent environment within which to conduct media operations. The first of these documents was a set of core messages: the information that was imperative to get out to the public. These messages highlight the SES’s credibility so people are more likely to seek SES help in emergencies and to give more weight to SES advice and warnings. They also publicise the state-wide storm and flood emergency help line and aim to increase people’s motivation and ability to take simple self-help measures (such as cleaning gutters and assembling an emergency kit) to reduce their vulnerability in a flood or storm.

Central to day-to-day media operations is the SES media policy, which:

- outlines the rationale for engaging with the media;
- summarises the key messages;
- articulates the authorisation for speaking with the media at each level of the organisation;
- sets out the duties and responsibilities for media officers at each level; and
- describes the training each media officer will receive.

As the role of the media officer often involves community education and public relations, the policy also states the goals and areas of activity for these functions. Every media officer and Unit and Division Controller is familiar with the policy.

Based on its media strategy and policy, the SES devised a decentralised, locally targeted media program. It considered three primary needs that a locally targeted approach could fulfil. First, local media opportunities enhance grass-roots awareness of the SES and of storm and flood safety. Second, locally targeted safety messages such as flood warnings greatly improve



PHOTO BY ANDREW HENNELL

Good relationships with the media enhance NSW SES operations and contribute to public safety



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The NSW SES media policy empowers volunteers and staff at all levels to work effectively with the media

the degree to which the public notice, remember and act on the messages. Third, local perspectives, information, interviews and photo and video opportunities provide life and drama to what would otherwise be matter-of-fact operational information.

The local angle

The SES chose at the outset to guide its media program on two principles. First, the SES media staff knew that the agency's greatest strength from a media-relations point of view was its traditional presence in the local community. Since its beginnings in 1955, SES volunteers have been prominent figures in their communities. Local, suburban and regional newspapers, radio stations and television stations have been consistently far more eager to give their local SES Units prominent coverage from week to week than the Sydney and state-wide media outlets. Moreover, Unit and Division volunteers often develop a very close and effective working relationship with the journalists in their communities.

Second, the SES already has a strong and tested method of operation in place – in accordance with international emergency management practice – that places operational activity at the lowest appropriate level. SES media staff structured media activities in the same way. Unit media officers would conduct local-level media activities within the scope of their training and the authorisations given them through the media policy. As an event escalated (in intensity, geographical scope or political interest), they would hand media co-ordination over to the Division media officer, and, as necessary, State Headquarters media staff. This three-tiered structure is highly flexible, and conserves scarce media resources while ensuring the appropriate level of response with minimal delay.

The SES media officer program

The SES media approach requires one more crucial element: well-trained and enthusiastic Unit

and Division media officers who would be uniquely positioned to make the most of – and generate – media opportunities.

To train these media officers, the SES determined the competencies (based primarily but not exclusively on the national competency standard PUACOM012A, "Liaise with media at the local level") that SES media officers would need. This determination took into account the core roles of the SES, the nature of emergency media, the general relationship of the SES with the media, the goals of the media program and the locally targeted media approach. The resulting training course covers the skills for media management—that is, meeting and anticipating the media's need for specific types of information, which in turn generates opportunities for guiding coverage in the way the SES wants it to go. These skills include:

- co-ordinating media conferences;
- writing media releases;

- drawing up operational and non-operational media plans;
- planning and carrying out public relations events; and
- working effectively with reporters (which includes presenting a professional image during interviews).

The SES media strategy builds on and emphasises the personal presence of the SES in each community. Specifically, this means media officers create opportunities for their controller to represent the SES to the media and the public and promote images that stress the importance and personal dedication of volunteers (rather than focusing on, for example, the floodboats or vehicles). There are certainly times when a single, high-level spokesperson is necessary. At these times, State Headquarters senior management are available to speak to the media.

Along with their local and regional activities, SES media officers are trained, and expected, to contribute to state-wide media activities during both operational and non-operational times. The media want information beyond the normal details contained in situation reports. They want 'colour', unusual stories, interesting hooks. They also want the operational details worded in a way that conveys the situation

so that non-emergency management professionals can understand.

During operations, the media officers are the eyes, ears, hands and feet of the State Headquarters media staff, performing work that is invaluable to a successful media presence. They find good photo and video opportunities, co-ordinate interviews and photo and video shoots at task sites, seek out and create interview opportunities, identify human interest stories and work with Operations staff to gather information about the operational response. Most importantly, they relay this information to State Headquarters media staff, where it forms part of the overall analysis that the SES supplies to the major media outlets. During non-operational times, the media officers implement co-ordinated state-wide media campaigns, working with their local and regional media outlets and providing local angles on state-wide messages and events.

In summary, the media officer program is designed to give Unit and Division media officers the greatest possible degree of decision-making power and scope for innovation, to support them with training, resources and consultation, to co-ordinate their activities in providing a consistent image to the public and to facilitate

media coverage and develop good working relationships with journalists at all levels.

The results so far

The media officer program has, by any measure, exceeded even the SES media staff's optimistic expectations. Interest in the program from the volunteers has been very high since its inception. The SES has active media officers in over one-third of its Units and Divisions (including many of the Sydney metropolitan Units, where media attention tends to be the most concentrated), with more signing on every month.

The degree of local and regional coverage the SES receives has increased dramatically. While the SES doesn't have the resources to fund comprehensive, quantitative studies of media coverage, particularly in local and regional media across NSW, the number of news clippings and radio and television stories has increased considerably since the launch in 1999 of the comprehensive media strategy, of which the media officer program is a major part. The media officers themselves keep State Headquarters informed of their activities and every week at least one Unit or Division somewhere in the State is conducting or participating in a significant public relations or community education event.

Not least among the accomplishments of the media officer program is the increase in Units' and Divisions' emergency management capacity. The media are essential partners in all aspects of emergency management—prevention, preparation, response and recovery. The presence of a corps of dedicated media officers not only frees operational and field staff to focus on the jobs they're trained for, it improves the overall quality of the Service's interaction with the media and its capacity to help communities be safer and more resilient.



PHOTO BY ANDREW HENNEL

Effective media liaison allows field volunteers to focus on responding to calls for help



PHOTO BY ANDREW HENNELL

NSW SES media officers are ideally positioned to highlight the unique aspects of their Unit's activities in local media

The media officers themselves validate the decentralised media approach. "Most of what we submit to our local paper gets published because the stories are of local interest," said one media officer. "They concern events or activities in our community, of benefit to our community, carried out by people from our community." This sentiment has been echoed by a dozen other media officers in numerous electronic discussions.

Finally, the media officers have reported that their participation in the program has provided them with many benefits, both personal and professional. They have reported an increase in confidence, broader skills, enthusiasm about a whole new field of activity, enjoyment of the creativity involved, interest in further emergency management training and the satisfaction of working closely with their media colleagues in other Units and Divisions.

It would be inaccurate to give the impression that there are no drawbacks or bugs in the media officer program. For example, the skill level among the media officers, although they are required to meet a standard in such things as writing ability and confidence in interviews, varies widely. So does the time each has to devote to the role, as well as the degree to which media officers possess "bonus skills" like photography, graphic design and public speaking. This means that absolute consistency in Units' media activities is difficult to achieve. There are also times when two or more Units covered by the same local or regional media may inadvertently be competing for coverage. In a number of these situations, the media officers of the Units involved have decided to proactively collaborate to produce joint media releases at times when both Units are active. However, in other areas the media officers are still developing procedures to co-

ordinate their activities to minimise competition.

Despite these drawbacks, the SES media staff consider the media officer program to be an overwhelming success. There are a number of factors that contribute to this:

- The role of the media officer has been rigorously defined, yet with scope for personal initiative, varying skills (and skill levels) and the application of experience to refine the role over time. Media officers are clear on what they are expected to do and how they are expected to do it. At the same time, there are as few restrictions as possible on their own creativity, and as many opportunities as possible to exercise it.
- The media officer's role, while it has been a part of SES operations for quite some time, has over the past few years acquired legitimacy and credibility within the organisation. This is a result

of State Headquarter's efforts to promote it, resource and standardise it, and raise it from the level of the ad hoc to its position as an integral part of Unit and Division management teams.

- The training offered for the role not only develops a standard set of assumptions and methods of operation; it also imparts a standard level of quality and a broad suite of skills. This, in turn, raises media officers' confidence and helps ensure their success.
- State Headquarters media staff have committed significant time and funding to support the Unit and Division media officers, producing resources, being available for consultation and providing a forum for collaboration.
- In keeping with its overall training strategy, the SES has made a point of valuing and seeking out media officers' existing expertise, as well as fostering their growth in the role. Those media officers with extensive experience in media and public relations are glad to contribute their insights, and those with less experience are eager to learn from them and, when they feel confident, to contribute their own insights.
- The SES also encourages collaboration and co-ordination among the media officers. Such tools as an electronic mailing list, joint media events and campaigns and media exercises that involve several Units and Divisions help contribute to this.

- Crucially, the media strategy in general and the media officer program in particular enjoy strong and effective support from SES senior management. Because of this, its momentum grows and the role is increasingly integrated with operations management, recruitment, community education and public relations. It becomes, in short, a source of strength for the Units and Divisions, and for the Service as a whole.

Next steps

Now that the media officer program is firmly established and successful, it is time to move to the next phase. The SES intends to consolidate the program with further training courses, media exercises, additional resources such as draft media releases and promotional items (as funding permits) and ongoing consultation and dissemination of best practice.

Based on the media officers' field experience over the last several years, State Headquarters, in consultation with Divisions and Units, are currently gathering that experience into a set of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for the media function. These SOPs incorporate media officers' field experience and feedback, the needs of the media and the SES's operations-management imperatives, and will guide media activities at all levels of the organisation. State Headquarters have also revised the SES media

policy to incorporate these experiences and insights.

State Headquarters are also introducing and contributing to initiatives to expand responsiveness and flexibility. For example, SES media staff have joined with media staff of other emergency services to devise a state-wide plan to establish and staff Joint Media Information Centres (which are activated during large or multi-agency events). These centres are an important area of participation for Unit and Division media officers.

Over the past two years, the SES has been piloting and rolling out a program of training, equipping and supporting community liaison officers (CLOs). This role complements the role of the media officer, and the SES continues to strengthen the ties between the two programs. Media staff often identify opportunities in media and community education for mutual support (for example, a Unit media officer and CLO may plan a commemoration of a local flooding event; the CLO might co-ordinate a public ceremony with the media officer arranging for interviews and photo opportunities).

Conclusion

As far as can be determined, the NSW State Emergency Service is an international pioneer in implementing a formal program to produce trained, professional, well-supported volunteer media officers at the local and regional levels and in providing them with the autonomy to make the role fully their own. As a result of commitment from State Headquarters and the enthusiasm, dedication and skill of the media officers, the SES's media presence is far stronger and public awareness of its roles and activities is far higher. The SES is much better placed to give warnings and safety information to the communities it serves. As the media officers



PHOTO BY ANDREW HENNEL

Media officers are part of Unit and Division operations-management teams



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The NSW SES will continue to strengthen its media management capacity as one vital component of its overall operational readiness

continue to increase in number and skill they will ensure that there is always orange on the scene.

For more information

To obtain the SES media policy and the training materials for the media officer program, contact the Public Relations Officer, NSW SES.

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Authors

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For the last six years, Peter O'Neill was responsible for promoting safety behaviour through the Triple Helix Risk Communication Model, managing the media response during disasters and marketing the NSW SES. Peter has now established a consultancy business specialising in marketing and branding of emergency agencies and programs, social marketing, community engagement, media management (including large disasters), public relations and sponsorship.