Battling ferocious flames: bushfires in the media

Cohen, Hughes, and White reflect on the deeper cultural issues encountered in bushfire representation in the popular media

Abstract

What are the deeper cultural issues encountered when bushfires are represented in the media? This paper reflects on the relationship between media constructions of bushfires and fire related issues. The recently published Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* recommended that 'Living with Fire', should become the basis for a national school education program. But what will happen if this goal conflicts with the dominant representations of bushfires in the media? This question is relevant in light of current attempts by researchers and emergency organisations to generate a new public discourse about bushfires in Australia.

"The discourse around fire is saturated with superlatives, with words such as 'exceptional', 'unprecedented', 'extraordinary' and so on. Such hyperbole may (I remain unconvinced) give some immediate comfort to those who have just suffered trauma and major losses. But in the long run, it only serves to reinforce ignorance and losses in the inevitable future event" (Campbell, 2003:246).

Introduction

In televised news programs, newspaper articles, talk-back radio, government campaigns, documentary and fiction films destruction and catastrophes are everywhere. Disaster images are beamed around the world delivered in neat packages to sophisticated home-entertainment systems and computer screens. Fear becomes a commodity, a product that sells well along with other consumer items. Commercial television uses its reporting of events such as wars and disasters as a way of capturing audiences by providing 'panic pleasure' (Marshall, 1994).

Disasters and disaster management occupy the minds and time of emergency planners, politicians and diverse government agencies, but they are also prominent in the minds of academics, writers, filmmakers, journalists, news-editors and the public at large. Disaster-response, therefore, is not just about improved management practices, better planning, new technologies and innovative mitigation programs. Rather, it must take account of particular images, cultural perceptions and understandings of our natural and built environments and their potential destruction.

Bushfires are integral to the ecology of the Australian environment, and so, some argue, should not be perceived as 'disasters' (Campbell, 2003). This argument appears in much of the criticism of the media depictions of such events. For example, a fire that started on 1 April, 2005, in the Wilsons Promontory National Park on the south-eastern tip of Victoria, had scorched around 6200 hectares by 12 April. The fire had been deliberately lit ten days earlier 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 official responses from Parks Victoria suggested that "unseasonal extreme weather conditions contributed significantly to the spread of the fire"; but that this fire would nevertheless have ecological benefits. In other words Parks Victoria rejected the media framing of the fire as a disaster and shifted the emphasis from 'blame' to the environmental benefits and the ecology of fire.[1]

Clearly there are other examples where collaboration with the media before, during and even post incidents work well. This is partly thanks to the emergency services organisations' implementation of different media management practices such as providing safety training for media personnel, facilitating media representatives' direct access to emergency headquarters and escorting journalists on location (Country Fire Authority of Victoria, 2002). A memorandum of understanding recently signed between ABC Victoria and various Victorian emergency services organisations is another such example. This document is the end product of the many years that local ABC radio has been collaborating

---

[1] A report by the Emergency Services Commissioner, Bruce Esplin, indicates that the DSE did not follow its own policies for prescribed burns when they started the fire. His full report is available on the DSE website at www.dse.vic.gov.au

A true representation, or a media construction?

successfully with various emergency services organisations. This collaboration has encompassed reporting warnings and other relevant information during incidents, and the running of educational media campaigns such as the Fire Awareness Day, whereby local ABC radio stations across Victoria help educate listeners about fire prevention and how to protect their homes.

Using the recently published report of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management* (Ellis et al. 2005), along with interviews with journalists and emergency services personnel, the aim of this paper is to reflect on the deeper cultural issues encountered in bushfire representation and media involvement in this process. Such a reflection is relevant in light of the recent call, and ongoing attempts by researchers and emergency organisations, to introduce the idea of 'Living with Fire' whilst simultaneously generating a new public discourse about bushfires in Australia.

Learning to live with fire

Andrew Campbell's paper *Learning to live with fire* is a call for a new understanding of bushfires in Australia. Fire should not be perceived as a "terrifying aberration, an ineluctable, unpredictable Act of God", instead we should start to see it as "an inherently Australian phenomenon that goes with the territory" (Campbell 2003:244).

The call for a new understanding of bushfires is not just about further knowledge and scientific research. Rather

it is about challenging current cultural constructions and media (mis)representations of bushfires.

"The typical media portrayal of bushfires as 'disasters' reinforces the desire to wage war against fire, and failure seems only to spur on heroic attempts to achieve a total victory" (Bowman, 2004:11).

Campbell himself, when explaining the poor public understanding of the difference between hazards and risk and its overall lack of respect for fire, argues that "The pervasive formulaic media images and clichés compound such ignorance" (2003:246).

The idea of 'Living with Fire' is further elaborated in the COAG Report (Ellis et al. 2005). If you teach Australians to live with fire and see it as a part of the natural environment they are not only more likely to know how to prepare for it, but will also be more able to survive the inevitable fire when it strikes, and may also better understand fire management and mitigation practices (Ellis et al. 2005: xii).

The COAG inquiry

Established after the severe 2002–03 fire seasons, the COAG inquiry aimed to examine the accumulated knowledge and experiences concerning bushfire fighting and management practices in Australia. One of the main issues for the inquiry was to propose methods of managing bushfire fighting resources and knowledge on a national basis, while evaluating the effectiveness of current management practices (Ellis et al. 2005:243). As a way of achieving its goal the inquiry proposed a revised risk-management framework. The report defined this as the 5Rs framework:

- "Research, information and analysis;
- Risk modification;
- Readiness;
- Response; and
- Recovery" (Ellis et al. 2005: xiii).

Each of the 5Rs calls for particular actions to be taken. Together they are designed to provide an holistic or comprehensive model for bushfire mitigation and fire management in Australia.

The first recommendation in the COAG inquiry report is for school-based bushfire educational programs (Ellis et al. 2005:xii). There is no doubt that a well-organised and national education program may be a good strategy to adopt. Yet, the main question not asked by the COAG inquiry is where do people actually learn about bushfires? Where does most of our knowledge about bushfires come from? How have our current knowledge, imagery and popular beliefs about bushfires evolved? How could a school-based curriculum compete with the dominant mass-media based discourse about bushfire?

Moreover, what are the other means, in addition to school-based programs, that may be used for integrating new knowledge or creating a new public discourse about bushfires?

Media myths and disaster mythologies

The media have repeatedly been accused, by emergency services and some researchers, of generating fears and 'myths' about bushfires and other natural disasters (Goltz, 1984; Blong, 1985; Quarantelli, 1989; Marshall, 1994; Country Fire Authority of Victoria 2000). 'Exploding houses', 'fire storms', 'fire balls', 'panic evacuations' are some of the classic media myths that emergency services have been working hard (and some may argue unsuccessfully) to dispel.

Clearly, the media may not be the only source of such ignorance. It is possible to argue, for example, that 'disaster mythology' in relation to bushfires is already built into the popular images of fire fighting itself. Chris Carson from the CFA in Victoria, who manages the organisation's wildfire education program and who has recently developed a new information-flow approach designed to provide information to the public during the onset of disasters, locates the problem with the current discourse on bushfires within the culture of emergency services agencies.

"We, as an emergency service, have built our own problem here. For example, one of the chief problems we have in educating people is a very strong attachment to all the disaster mythology. 'I can't survive it', 'the fire moves faster than a speeding locomotive', 'houses explode'. These are all myths. Unfortunately, the language we've used to sell our stories to the media has been the language of disasters in the past. So that's how the media chose to communicate our stories on a number of occasions. Ok it's dramatic. It sells air space. Fine, but we own that, we pumped out our own heroism, as an organisation, for a long time and I'm

not interested in that anymore" (Chris Carson, personal communication, 24.02.2005).

At the same time it seems that such self-reflections are rare. It is almost taken for granted by emergency agencies and researchers alike that it is media coverage and the televised descriptions of bushfires that reproduce mythologies and the misleading views of bushfires and their role within the Australian environment. The contribution of emergency organisations to this problem is not normally acknowledged.

Apart from the issue of better 'working relations' between emergency services organisations, scientific knowledge and media representations of bushfires, what is missing from the current debate about the media is further data about how individuals and different social groups gain their understanding of such events. How does a particular media report or a specific media treatment of a particular incident shape individual or collective perceptions and understandings of bushfires? As Quarantelli indicates, in the US there is a lack of data concerning who listens or watches what, with whom, where and for what purposes during an emergency event or a disaster (1989:15).

Interestingly, the COAG report acknowledges that despite the importance of educational programs, innovative use of web-based technologies and traditional community outreach programs, for many Australians it is still the mass media that are the main source of information about bushfires. However, this important reference to the media is presented as problematic in the sense that the media, "quite naturally, tend to focus more on the dramatic than the evidentiary. This can result in misconceptions that are both persistent and dangerous" (Ellis et al. 2005:170).

The debate, therefore, is not just about semantics. The main issue for emergency services organisations and disaster prevention and mitigation programs is achieving a desirable behavioural change. Public health, education

The bushfire – an inherently Australian phenomenon that goes with the territory.

The persuasive formulaic media images and clichés compound poor public understanding of hazards and risks.

and risk-communication campaigns are measured against the effectiveness of different means of reaching the public and generating a particular behavioural change (Rohrmann, 2003:116). These are extremely important issues. Yet, it is interesting to note that those who accuse the media of generating misconceptions, or broadcasting misleading information about bushfires, assume that there is a clear linkage between the televised imagery and the behaviour of the public.

The media, in the most generic sense of the term, have important effects on the social, political and cultural aspects of our everyday social life. Academic literature and various Media Effects theories relating to the broader cultural influence of the media, or in more empirical case studies in relation to disasters and warning systems, indicate the complexity of the relations between media text, and its production and interpretation by a diverse audience (Carter, 1979). An influential work in this context is that of Denis McQuail, who provides a comprehensive study of diverse mass media, including new media, and their different effects and meanings for the audience (McQuail, 2005). Such theories demonstrate that media effects, intended and unintended, are quite diverse and hard to pin down in relation to specific social behaviours.

Yet, within the current discourse media images and media coverage of bushfires (and other disasters) are presented as both the *symptom* and the *disorder*. As a symptom, media images are perceived as an example of common mythologies about bushfires that may often resonate with the public misconception. At the same time the view of the media as a disorder, is exemplified by the claim that the evocative language used in the media may steer individuals to act, or fail to act, in ways that may put their life and property in danger and may therefore lead to injuries and death.

"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" (Chris Carson, personal communication, 24.02.2005).

Media management

It is in the context of communicating risk to the public that the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment in Victoria have established information units that are activated under certain conditions. 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 (Carson, 2004). This approach challenges the traditional media liaison practices used by emergency services organisations by arguing that "Communication with the media is not an objective, but a tool for achieving the objective of reaching those at risk" (Carson, 2004:70).

Such an operational approach makes a lot of sense. It also supports decentralising the information about an incident by giving the local Incident Controller the authority to decide which information should be released to the public. This may prove quite an effective way for providing the public with the right information at the right time (Godin and O'Neill, 2005). However, at the same time this operational approach to the media lacks a broader understanding of the way media constructions of such events may generate public debate and understanding, and influence policy makers and the emergency services organisations themselves (Olson et al, 2005).

Media constructions

The public and media discourse about bushfires is never a mere reflection of what is 'out there'. Rather

the media are social actors actively constructing reality (Quarantelli 2002).

"Individuals seldom acquire that knowledge [about disasters] from personal experience. The Mass Communication (MC) system constructs that reality for most people, including emergency managers, disaster planners and crisis decision-makers. For example, are disasters the 'result' or the 'fault' of what? The sequence in disaster research has gone from characterizing them as Acts of God, to Acts of Nature, to Acts of Human Beings. In MC stories, all these tend to be used, with the particular frame structuring how the story is presented, and what will provide the agenda for the attention of readers/viewers" (Quarantelli, 2002:3).

As Quarantelli further reminds us, 'popular culture' is another important site where images and understandings about disasters are constantly produced (2002).

The current discourse about bushfires is fuelled by the media's tendency to focus on the most dramatic aspect of the incident. For this reason, some may argue, the public may get the wrong perception of such events and may not fully understand their effects. Yet, it is not often clear how the public responds to, or interprets these media images. It is important to remember that for a typical viewer (and one may argue for journalists reporting such incidents) dramatic coverage and the imagery of an ongoing incident is only one set of images among a never-ending flow of similar images of disasters, locally and internationally, real and fictional.

Clearly, the media are not ignored. Most emergency services organisations and government offices run media departments and regularly use trained public relations personnel who monitor and actively manage their relationship with the media. In this sense, government offices are very careful about their public image as projected in the media – but this can be counter-productive for the emergency services. Openness to the media, rather than further or more effective 'management' of the media, may be a better approach for future collaboration with the media.

Asa Wahlquist, a rural writer with *The Australian*, recalls how during 1994, when she worked for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, an article she wrote lead to a public debate about hazard burning. This public debate, she argues, eventually lead to some legislative changes that enabled fire agencies to conduct more fuel reduction burning, and gave them much more power over planning and building control issues.

"In 1994 we had lot of bushfires around Sydney and what had happened was that a lot of people moved to areas near to bushland and they had really objected to hazard reduction burning. I had this interview with Phil Koperberg [Commissioner New South Wales Rural Fire Service] and he basically said that one reason we have all these terrible problems with bushfires is that because of community

resistance, we weren't able to burn off the way we wanted to when it would have been safe to do this…. And that really started a huge community debate about how we managed bushfires, and in this case the criticism was not of the bushfire people but of the people in the community who said that we don't like fire cause we don't like smoke, we don't think it is a good idea. Because of that debate, the laws in NSW were changed and the bushfire people got much more power to do hazard reduction burning and that sort of thing" (Asa Wahlquist, personal communication, 16.03.05).

Media and disasters

The role of the media in reporting about bushfires before, during and after incidents is an extremely complex issue. Bushfires, especially the more dramatic and devastating ones, are presented as major media events. The media depiction of such events, some may argue, is somewhat different from actual bushfires, or from bushfires as actual events. Yet it is often hard to make such a distinction as even people who are close to the event itself, including the emergency services, may use or be influenced by the media reports. It is not very useful, therefore, to look at media constructions alone or alternatively to study the actual event while disregarding or ignoring media participation, construction and involvement in it.

The challenge, which the COAG report, despite its many achievements, fails to acknowledge, is that the media plays a significant role in generating debate but also understandings about 'Living with Fire'. It is not enough to talk about media myths or misconceptions, nor is it likely to be possible to create a media environment where there is a focus on the presentation of 'clear and accurate reports', which meet the needs of emergency organisations. This is not simply an issue of better operational information-flow, nor is it about public relations and better media management practices. Rather, what is needed is a better understanding of how media institutions operate in relation to, and during, actual disasters.

Conclusion

The first stage of our research project involving interviews with information and media managers from within emergency services organisations and media industry professionals is beginning to uncover how these two groups operate and understand each other. There is an indication that many of these individuals understand the importance of developing good working relationships with each other. There is still, however, a debate about how much access should be given to journalists and media representatives, and how the dissemination of information may aid or harm disaster management efforts and public safety.

An important reference to the media in the COAG report is the call for each State and Territory to

formalise non-exclusive agreements with the Australian Broadcasting Commission as the official emergency broadcaster (Ellis et al., 2005:136). At the same time the report has little to say about how the media may be integrated into planning and preparation processes, or how they could be actively involved in achieving the desired goal of teaching Australians about 'Living with Fire'. From this perspective, we argue, the COAG report has a precarious blind spot. There is a need to rethink the media's relationship with the emergency services and to address it in a more dynamic and creative way than is currently the case. Also, there is a need to consider COAG's call for a national educational strategy based on 'Living with Fire' when it conflicts with the dominant representations of bushfires in the media.

The imperatives of the news media, which are aligned to the creation and retention of audiences, need to be understood and taken into account. At the same time there is a need to better understand how individuals and communities use the media to satisfy their requirements for information about bushfire preparedness prior to and during ongoing incidents.

References

Blong, R. J., (1985), Public Views on Disaster Response and the News Media – Some Australian Examples. *Report of proceedings of a research workshop on human behaviour in disaster in Australia*, Mt. Macedon, Australian Counter Disaster College.

Bowman, D., (2003) Bushfires: a Darwinian perspective. G. Cary, D. Lindenmayer & S. Dovers (eds), *Australia Burning: fire ecology, policy and management issues*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

Burkhart, F. N., (1991) Journalists as bureaucrats: perceptions of 'social responsibility' media roles in local emergency planning. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 9(1): 75–87.

Campbell, A., (2003) Learning to live with fire. G. Cary, D. Lindenmayer & S. Dovers (eds), *Australia Burning: fire ecology, policy and management issues*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

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.

Carter, T. M. (1979) Community warning systems: the relationship among the broadcast media, emergency service agencies and the National Weather Service. *Disasters and the Mass Media: Proceedings of the Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media Workshop*. National Academy of Sciences, Committee on Disasters and the Mass Media, Washington, D.C, pp. 214–228.

Country Fire Authority of Victoria (2000) *CFA Media Forum*, Macedon, Vic. Emergency Management Australia.

Ellis, S., Kanowski, P., Whelan, R. , (2005) *National Inquiry on Bushfire Mitigation and Management*, Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Godin, L. and O'Neill, P., (2005) Orange at the scene: the SES media officer program. *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 46–52.

Goltz, J. D. (1984) Are the news media responsible for the disaster myths? A content analysis of emergency response imagery. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, Vol.2, No. 3, pp. 345–368.

Marshall, P. D., (1994) Panic TV – Australian bushfires and the media future. *Meanjin* Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 537–543.

McQuail, D., (2005) *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, 5th Ed, Sage Publication.

Quarantelli, E., (1989) The Social Sciences Study of Disasters and Mass Media. T. Walters, L. M. Walters and L. Wilkins. Hillsdale, N.J., L. Erlbaum (eds), *Bad Tidings: Communication and Catastrophe*, pp. 1–19.

Quarantelli, E., (2002) The role of the mass communication system in natural and technological disasters and possible extrapolation to terrorism situation, *Natural Disasters Roundtable: National Academy of Sciences on Countering Terrorism: Lessons Learned From Natural and Technological Disasters*, Washington, Disaster Research Center (DRC) – Preliminary Paper.

Rohrmann, B., (2003) Bushfire preparedness of residents: insights from socio-psychological research. G. Cary, D. Lindenmayer & C. Dovers (eds), *Australia Burning: fire ecology, policy and management issues*, CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne.

Olson, S., Richard; Gawronski, T. Vincent., (2005) The 2003 Southern California Wildfires: Constructing Their Cause(s). *Quick Response Research Report 173*. Colorado: National Science Foundation or the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center.

Authors

Dr. Erez Cohen is a social anthropologist and a postdoctoral fellow in the department of media studies at La Trobe University. He is currently conducting Bushfire CRC funded research on the relationship between emergency organisations and the media in Australia.

Dr. Peter Hughes lectures in Media Studies at La Trobe University. His research and teaching focuses on documentary and new media. He is co-author, with Ina Bertrand of *Media research methods: institutions, texts, audiences*. Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave (2005).

Assoc. Prof. Peter B. White is conducting research on the social implications of new media and telecommunications policy. He is the Director of the La Trobe University Online Media Program which conducts research into the uses of new media. Peter directs the Media Studies Program's television industry training program in Vietnam.