

# Bushfires and the media: a cultural perspective

*Hughes, White and Cohen look at how changing technology is forcing a new relationship between emergency management agencies and the media*

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## Introduction

Thinking about bushfires needs to occur in the context of broad scale social positions which are circulating in society, of which two examples are neo liberalism and global warming; the latter of which has been on the agenda for scientists at least since the work of the Club of Rome, but is increasingly on the political agenda, most notably since the recent Stern report (Stern 2007).

How are these contexts relevant? Increasingly global warming is seen as an issue for fire and land management agencies ((Johnson and Lee 2007), and in a number of responses from the Bushfires CRC such as the 2007 forum: Are big fires inevitable?) The likely combined environmental effects of global warming are predicted to mean an increase in the incidence of fires, an increase in the severity of fires, and a decrease in the environmental resources with which to fight fires.

The neo liberal context is relevant in several ways. It has both coincided with, and been partially driven by, changing social and economic structures, the most relevant of which here are:

- in the organisation of work,
- in forms of leisure, and
- in new media structures and technologies and the ways in which these intersect with both work and leisure.

And finally, the neo liberal context is relevant because governments of all persuasions, and at all levels, in the last twenty years have accepted an economic and political agenda dominated by market economics. For the bushfire and emergency services community several features of this situation are relevant:

- A reduced willingness to spend government money on public and community services (linked to a desire always to run surplus budgets),
- an increasing emphasis on the private provision of services to the community, and

- a related emphasis on individual responsibility and self sufficiency. This is most evident in such aspects of life as education, child care and medicine.

Within this context bushfire and emergency management agencies can expect that, due to global warming, calls on their services are likely to increase, but that because of the shift away from public funding they will have less money available to provide these services.

As a consequence, in recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on community awareness of fire risk and community self sufficiency. This adds urgency to the need for community awareness and media information programs. It is argued, then, that the media have a vital role to play in risk communication. The COAG report of 2005 argued that it was important that

“All Australians understand, accept and respect bushfires and know they will continue to occur. ... Communities [need to] understand that the risk, and the responsibility for bushfire mitigation and management, is shared by individuals, landholders, communities, fire and land management agencies, researchers, and governments” (Ellis, Kanowski, and Whelan 2004, ix).

The report argues that to achieve this goal it is important to understand the role of the media in the understanding of bushfires. Traditionally, the media have repeatedly been accused of generating fears and ‘myths’ about bushfires and other natural disasters (Blong 1985; Country Fire Authority of Victoria 2000; Goltz 1984; Quarantelli 1989). In fact this was one of the dominant patterns evident in the review of the literature on media and bushfires which formed the first stage of our research (Hughes and White 2004).

Our review set out to find out what had been written in the following areas:

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

Themes emerging from this review were:

- that media reports perpetuate a number of myths, cliches and flawed thinking concerning bushfires,
- that media reports tend to portray those affected by fires as hopeless victims,
- that media reports engage in blaming and the creation of scapegoats, and
- that the presence of media at bushfires is itself a stressor, and a distractor, for fire agencies.

The claim that media perpetuate myths is a point which recurred in some of our interviews with agency personnel. It is taken for granted that the role of the media, from the point of view of the agencies, is to present accurate and timely information to the public. This is the information and warning role of the media, and raises questions about

- what are the best media to use for information and community warning?
- what are the best ways to frame messages for these media? and
- at a later level of consideration, how do members of the public understand these messages?

The focus of these questions is on the informing role of the media, a role most closely associated with journalism. Understandably agencies tend to concentrate on developing close working relationships with news media to enhance this information provision.

Another strategy has been to develop alternative means of information provision. Two examples which are relevant are the development of arrangements with ABC local radio to function as an emergency information network when necessary, and the development of agencies' own websites providing comprehensive information to the public.

It was argued in our first report, based upon this review of the literature, that it was important to understand the different time periods relevant to bushfires: the period immediately leading up to and during a fire, the recovery period and the longer term period between fires. In each case the appropriate media are different, and aspects of our research sought to understand this in more detail.

A second comment on the themes which emerged is the importance—recognised by the agencies—that the images of those affected by fires as helpless victims, and of fire-fighters as heroic saviours, both tend to work against the need to develop self sufficiency in communities.

Following this review of the literature, research was undertaken in three stages. The first two stages examined aspects of the institutional structures of media. These were:

1. research into the relationship between media and fire agencies looking at the media (Cohen, Hughes, and White 2006a; Cohen, Hughes, and White 2006b), and
2. research into the relationship between fire agencies and the media looking at the fire agencies (Cohen, Hughes, and White 2006d).

Our third stage moved the focus somewhat. We undertook research into community use of the media, looking at one community in particular. Here we were seeking to understand the ways in which members of a relatively diverse rural community made use of the media, how they made use of warnings and risk communications, and their attitudes toward these. We made the assumption in this particular project that audience members were active in their use of the media and would exhibit complex relationships with risk communication. Our findings bore this out (Cohen, Hughes, and White 2007 (Forthcoming); Cohen, Hughes, and White 2006c).

This stage of our research was motivated by the observation that both the media and the fire and emergency service agencies appeared to make certain assumptions about those addressed by risk communication and about the media. Specifically we were concerned that some of our earlier data suggested that 'the audience' for risk communication was seen as homogenous, and that there was a need to understand in more detail what the audience understood by 'the media'. Here we were moving away from institutional research, and were beginning to raise questions about how audience members interpret the material with which they are engaging.

Questions of interpretation are the basis of much of the work of media studies - the field within which we operated. A number of issues were raised by this stage of our research, but for the purpose of this paper two are particularly important. These are:

- that obtaining and maintaining the trust of the audience is a crucial matter for agencies, and that this is quite difficult, and
- that the broad context within which the audience engages with the media is important (here our research merely confirmed well established understandings within media studies).

## Learning from this initial research experience

Our experience has shown that for agencies to comprehend the relationships between understandings and action around fires and other emergencies they need to start asking new questions. The 'old' questions will keep coming up with the same answers. Our research has begun to reframe the questions and is leading to new insights. Some of those questions revolve around:

- the social and institutional forces which lead to the creation of 'messages' about bushfires,
- the ways that people incorporate media messages about bushfires before, during and after bushfires, and
- the rapidly changing nature of media industries which will ultimately lead to the undermining of 'official sources' unless fire and emergency services respond appropriately.

We believe these are particularly important areas for investigation, and might lead more specifically to investigations into:

- the potential role of new media technologies as media for dissemination of warnings,
- the popular culture context within which warnings and risk communication are interpreted, and
- media forms which are popular cultural forms in their own right, and have significant implications for the management of trust and credibility by agencies: talkback radio and current affairs television.

In the remainder of this paper we want to make some introductory comments on each of these. In doing so we also want to move away from a framework which concentrates on 'information' provision; a framework which runs the risk of seeing information in a linear and instrumental fashion. This extends our thinking in our third research stage in which we understood the media to be sites in which individual and community realities are constructed through dynamic processes of sense making. This constructivist view argues that meanings develop through social interactions and that media are themselves significant spaces of social interaction and sense making.

### ***New media technologies***

The media landscape is changing very rapidly world wide. New media technologies such as mobile phones and the internet are making possible new media forms such as text messages, web pages, blogs, podcasts and video and photo sharing sites (such as Flickr and YouTube). A number of these forms are being lumped together into the envelope term Web2.0 (the subject of several presentations at the Emergency Media Conference itself). Several features of these technologies are likely to be important for agencies.



*The presence of media at bushfires is a stressor, and a distractor, for fire agencies.*

- They are not 'broadcast' technologies—in the sense that users need to seek them out, at least in the first instance. In the case of some they can be set automatically to download material to one's computer or mobile phone (or in the case of spam to do so without the user's permission). Such technologies have become known as 'disruptive technologies'.
- Because they are not broadcast technologies they tend to fragment audiences. It is becoming increasingly impossible to assume a mass audience for particular media forms—for example audiences for television are declining. More specifically, among particular demographics, audiences for news and current affairs are declining. Young people get much of their understanding of contemporary events from radio and TV comedy shows (such as *The Glass House* and *The Chaser's War on Everything*), while women are much less inclined to watch TV news and much more inclined to watch current affairs programming.
- A number of these technologies disrupt our understandings of time and space: people can download radio programs as podcasts and listen to them away from the radio at a time of their own choosing. So they may not be listening to the radio when warnings are being broadcast. On the other hand podcasts (and now, video podcasts) have potential as sites for longer term information provision about emergency preparedness between incidents. These technologies are providing both threats and opportunities for the provision of emergency communications.
- As we have already suggested, new media are changing the ways people interact with media, but they also reflect, and perhaps shape, new social and cultural developments. Individuals are now more able than ever before to be both consumer and producer (the term 'prosumer' has now become

a buzz word). Using blogs, video sharing sites such as YouTube and other disruptive technologies people are able to both share information and to make public comment. There is an increasing trend toward 'social networking' (eg MySpace, Facebook) and peer produced sites (Wikipedia). These developments provide a different model from the top down information provision which has tended to be favoured by emergency agencies, which often prefer more centralised control of information (to reduce the spread of 'misinformation') and to protect the brand and maintain trust and credibility. On the other hand a more open, peer produced approach to sharing information will give voice to those affected by fire and allow us to draw upon and share local knowledge.

Perhaps the most important point to be made about these new technologies is that, from the point of view of the user, they are not simply a source of information but are social and cultural spaces (Fernback 2007; Hughes 2003; White and White 2004, 2005).

**Popular culture**

In an interview conducted by Erez Cohen, a CFA staff member who we called 'Ian', commented that 'bushfires have a particular place in the Australian people's imagination' (Cohen 2005, 4.). While this was really just a throw away comment at the time, it is an important observation. As communicators in the emergency context we need to understand more about the place of bushfires in the popular imagination, and about the ways other aspects of popular culture and the popular imaginary will interact with our attempts at risk communication.

One aspect of this is likely to be the ways in which trends in popular culture at the moment intersect with issues of trust and credibility, and also with gender.

Gender was one of the issues which emerged indirectly from listening to the recordings of our focus groups. Although it was not specifically addressed in the discussions there appeared to be some difference between the men in the groups, and the women, in terms of how they related to the media in general and to particular forms of communication. While the men (in particular one rather dominant member of one group) had quite fixed views about the appropriateness of a more focussed 'information' centred approach, and spoke quite scathingly about 'misinformation', and about emotional modes of speech, it appeared that the women were more engaged by less 'instrumental' modes of speech. This is consistent with many findings on the media, and so is no surprise. Nevertheless it may be of particular importance for risk communication. If nothing else, it points to the danger in assuming a single homogenised audience for risk communication.



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*The changing nature of media industries will lead to the undermining of "official sources".*

As already mentioned, television industry research indicates that women are much less likely to watch news than men, and much more likely to watch current affairs programming. This is reflected in the content of current affairs programs, and in their mode of address to the audience and their emotional content.

Extending this consideration a little wider, a third issue is that of the broad cultural context within which audiences engage with our attempts at risk communication. To fully understand the likely impact of our work we need to take into account the impacts of other cultural engagements which provide the wider context. Any attempt at risk communication will be interpreted by audiences within the broad web of their media experiences, including other programs, whether information or fiction based. Much more work needs to be done not only on the range of representations of emergencies in the media, but also of representations of gender, Australianness, citizenship and risk. Current work by Peter Hughes on the 'reality TV' series *Border security* and on the documentary series *Bushfire summer* is relevant here.

The important point here is that, while it is important to understand the provision of risk communications, it is also important to go beyond this communication model to a wider consideration of the complex ways in which audiences engage with cultural representations, including risk communications.

### **Talkback radio**

The issue of trust and credibility is a significant issue. Our research has shown the emphasis placed upon 'branding' by agencies. This is an important strategy and our research confirms that it plays a significant role in the reception of information by the audience. However it is a fragile thing, especially in the current cultural context of a growing lack of trust in public institutions (Furedi 2005; Tulloch 2006; Tulloch and Lupton 2003).

An understanding of two forms of media may well be important in this area. One might well be contemporary current affairs television and another might be talkback radio. In our Grampians focus groups, and in informal discussions with a number of fire agency personnel, talkback radio has been referred to as problematic for agencies for two reasons.

3. There is some concern that people ringing talkback radio to report their observations of fire situations might spread misinformation. In our work we obtained the tapes of hours of broadcasting on ABC local radio during the Central Coast (NSW) bushfires of summer 2005/6. In separate pieces of research Tebbutt (Tebbutt 2007) and Turner (Turner 2007; Turner, Tomlinson, and Pearce 2007) have pointed to the way many callers to some talkback radio programs are ringing to share information with other listeners. It was in this spirit that callers during this incident rang to suggest alternative routes to the F3 freeway which was blocked by fire and smoke. However some of the alternatives proposed posed significant potential dangers to any motorists who might take up the suggestions.
4. While examples such as the previous case probably have little implication for warning strategies adopted by agencies, talkback radio discussions have the potential for political damage to agencies and there is potential for commentary from callers to undermine or create doubts about the credibility of fire agencies.

Graeme Turner has argued that

*"talkback radio now plays a prominent role in media strategies for managing public perceptions of issues and personalities. It also has the capacity to break away from attempts to manage it"*

and here is the particularly apposite comment:

*"we even have a name - "wildfire" - for such moments when public interest and opinion suddenly outstrip the ability of official or institutional representatives to control or shape it"* (Turner, Tomlinson, and Pearce 2007, 108).

The thrust of Turner's argument, which is taken up in a more recent article (Turner 2007), is that

*"there is not yet much of an analytic literature dealing with the appeal of particular versions of talkback, or with*

*distinctions between iterations of the format"* (Turner, Tomlinson, and Pearce 2007, 109).

However, he argues, *"most [researchers] agree that talkback can serve a number of different cultural functions"* (p 109). He goes on to make the claim, of particular interest to emergency agencies that there seem to be significant differences between metropolitan and regional talkback programming in which a

*"more communitarian function is central to those calling up regional stations, whereas the more explicitly political function seems to be prominent for those calling up metropolitan stations"*

(Turner, Tomlinson, and Pearce 2007, 109).

While there is some valuable work being done on talkback radio at the moment, there is scope for much more research, particularly in relation to the specific context of risk communication and to the wider cultural context in which talk back radio can be seen to constitute a space within which community concerns about safety and risk are debated.

### **Conclusion**

We have argued that for any student of media in the contemporary situation a number of cultural shifts are evident, several of which are relevant to emergency communication:

- A shift away from the centralised broadcast model of media and communications toward an increasingly diverse and diffused mediascape with concomitantly diverse and diffused audiences.
- New technologies of media and cultural forms which enable a more dialogic relationship between audience members and between audience and media. In particular a shift towards a break down in distinctions between producer and consumer.
- A shift away from television news and current affairs and towards other forms of programming which use a less 'information' based approach. These are being replaced by a multiplicity of sources of information and comment.

In seeking to undertake serious research on the media and bushfires, we are faced with the view that everyone is an expert on the media because they 'watch TV' or use the Internet. This ignores the fact that, in our view, the old approaches to studying media and bushfires have come to a dead end. However there is a substantial tradition in media research which can be used to contribute to understanding real world problems, and there is an increasing body of research into new directions in media and communications which can provide valuable insights for those able to draw on this research.



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*There is a shift away from the centralised broadcast media model towards a diverse mediascape.*

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## About the Authors

**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.

**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.

Email: [p.hughes@atrobe.edu.au](mailto:p.hughes@atrobe.edu.au)

