



BUSHFIRES AND THE MEDIA

REPORT NO: 4

Media and bushfires: A Community Perspective Grampians Fires 2006

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ISSN 1833 184X



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SUMMARY

This report examines the ways residents in the Grampians of Victoria area used and evaluated the regional / local media and their state and national based media in the context of the 2006 bushfires. This is the fourth report in an ongoing series.

Three key issues are identified:

1. The media are perceived as part of a broader information gathering process. Information gathered needs to be 'useable' in the sense that it can help individuals make decisions about the best ways to prepare for and survive fire, and save their property. Different media broadcasts are evaluated as 'informative' and useful or 'sensational' and, accordingly, dismissible. Community members actively seek timely and accurate information.
2. Local knowledge is perceived as the most important aspect in the information that is broadcast. Lack of such knowledge may result in listeners totally disregarding the messages. Additionally, media reports, messages, and community warnings that lack specific and local knowledge may cause confusion and unnecessary alarm.
3. The effects of media reporting are both immediate and long lasting. Residents are aware of the media's ability to promote or hinder their local communities and the recovery process and actively lobby the media to ensure that the needs of their community are met.

This study may help fire agencies to:

1. Understand how local media are used by rural communities during fires.
2. Understand the tensions that result from the ways rural residents use and distinguish between local/regional and metropolitan and out-of-state bushfire information.
3. Better use the local/regional media to increase community safety and awareness in relation to bushfire mitigation, preparedness and crisis management issues before, during and after the fires.

INTRODUCTION

I don't have time to just sit down and listen to the radio or watch TV. I am always in and out. I catch a short glimpse; hear the radio and I am off again. I am not in the CFA and I don't have access to the CFA radio, so I am in the dark as far as that sort of thing goes. Basically it is the local community and the ABC Local Radio for me. (A participant in the focus group)¹

Previous reports in the *Media and the Bushfires Project*² looked at various aspects of the relationship of fire agencies with the media before and during fires both from the agencies' perspective and from the point of view of journalists reporting about fires. One of the issues that emerged during the first stage of the research was the significance of the local and regional media and the differences between those and urban national based media in the context of bushfire reporting, mitigation and preparedness.

Most of Australia's population and its media are concentrated in and around its major cities where bushfire risk is low or negligible. Because of this the national media often reflect the values and pre-occupations of their urban audiences and play on stereotypical attitudes towards bushfires. Bushfires are presented as exciting,

threatening and destructive events to be consumed as spectacles.³ While these urban-centred media are distributed nationally through broadcast networking and physical delivery of newspapers, there is a vibrant rural media industry comprising newspapers, radio and television broadcasters. When these media cover bushfires they are dealing with issues which are highly relevant to the day to day life and sometimes the survival of their audiences.

Both the journalists and the fire agency personnel we previously interviewed argued that local and regional media treat fire events differently from national media. Local regional media, they argued, are more knowledgeable about fire preparedness, fire mitigation and the importance of delivering specific warnings during incidents. In contrast, urban and national based media, despite attempts by fire agencies to work with and 'manage the media' in various other ways, will tend to depict large bushfires as 'disasters'. National media, and in particular commercial television, they argued, will tend to sensationalise bushfires in promoting their own agendas and their own commercial interests.

In that sense bushfires presented in the national media, as with other natural and man made disasters, become part of a media infotainment system that thrives on the most dramatic images of flames, daring rescue operations and the destructive power of fires. Dramatic stories of 'exploding houses' or lucky escapes, injuries and death are typical to the media coverage of bushfires. Such images are in contrast to, and at times contravene, the ordered delivery of community safety information and the broadcasting of specific warnings and defence strategies during emergencies. Dramatic media images may also undermine fire agencies' efforts to educate communities about the realities of 'living with fires'.⁴

The main aim of the current research was to study the ways rural residents understand and use both their local / regional media and the national or state-based media to understand bushfire risks, preparedness and immediate incident information. It was decided to locate the study in a rural centre where there has been a history of bushfires and which has a local and regional media presence. The views of local residents were obtained through focus group discussions.

RESEARCH METHODS

Recruitment of focus group participants was through advertising in the local newspapers. In addition a researcher was interviewed on one of the morning shows on the ABC Local Radio Western Victoria 594 and a short article about the research was published in the *Mail Times*, a local newspaper. We also organised a letter box drop of pamphlets about the sessions for residents in the area.

We ran two focus group sessions conducted by a professional focus group moderator. In addition we collected general information about the participants in the groups. The sessions were structured around the evaluation of the media before, during and after the fires. Participants were asked to write down what they saw as the 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' of the media treatment of the fires in the different stages. Further, three short audio segments taken from actual reports played on the Melbourne metropolitan ABC Local Radio 774 during the fires, were used as part of the focus group sessions.

These audio segments were selected by the researchers as indicative types of reports about the fire. The first was a 'typical' report about the fire by a journalist in Halls Gap who describes her personal impression of the fire threat and the community responses

to it. The second was an official warning that used the Standard Emergency Warning Signal (SEWS) followed by the presenter reading a specific warning (in retrospect it became obvious that the presenter could not pronounce the road names and had no knowledge about the area). The third segment was a 'talkback' format where an emotional caller describes how she lost her holiday house in the Grampians area during the fires. The sessions were recorded and transcribed and the main issues and topics identified.

The aim of this qualitative research method is to provide an overview of the main issues and concerns affecting the participants. In that sense the report does not examine or evaluate actual media or agencies' performances during the fires. The expressions of opinions within the setting of the focus group indicate the ways locals interact and debate these issues among themselves. The strength of such a research method is in addressing the specific contexts of the participants who are members of the community studied. Similar research in other areas may provide very different outcomes. Further replication of similar studies in other areas may provide a broader basis for comparison. However, despite the limitation of this particular study we believe that the specific insights presented in the report can be used as a basis for fine tuning fire agencies' media strategies and inform their current practices.

THE FIRE CONTEXT

The Grampians fires during December and January 2006 revealed that mass media, and in particular radio, are now central to the core practice of preparing for, and fighting, bushfires in Victoria.

Four significant fires hit the Grampians area during the summer of 2006. Griffin Track fire (21st December 2005), Deep Lead fire (31st

December 2005), Yallakar fire (19th January 2006) and Mt Lubra fire (20th January 2006). A total area of 142,558ha was burnt on both private and public land.

The first fire was contained within the Grampians National Park but the other three happened during extreme weather conditions and caused serious damage. The Deep Lead fire burnt 11 houses; 68 other buildings; 298km fencing; 1871 sheep and 6954 sq. hay bales. The Yallakar fire destroyed 40km fencing; 375 sheep; 950 large round hay bales. Mt Lubra fire burnt 40 houses; 72 other buildings; 62,600 sheep & 160 cattle killed; 2600 beehives; 36,000 ha pasture; 10,250 tonnes of hay & 1900km fencing. Two lives were lost. In addition the fire destroyed numerous walking tracks / board walks, camp & picnic grounds, lookouts, toilets and other visitor facilities in the Grampians National Park.⁵

These fires were the largest fire events in Victoria since the Local ABC Local Radio Victoria signed a Memorandum of Understanding with emergency services organisations and began operating as the official emergency broadcaster throughout the state.⁶ Ian Mannix Local Radio Manager, ABC Victoria notes that apart from the Grampians fires there were multiple fires burning across Victoria for long periods of time that stretched resources of the media and the ability of Local ABC Radio to respond locally. This caused vast confusion in some areas. In his internal report about these events Mannix describes the situation as 'multiple simultaneous threats' (Mannix, 2006, unpublished). Due to its extensive regional and local network ABC Local Radio is seen by the Victorian fire agencies as one of the most important tools for communicating timely warnings to threatened communities during fires.

In order to explore the role of the local, regional, and national media we sought a research site where there was recent history of

bushfire, a thriving local media industry, and which was outside the coverage of major urban broadcast media. After consultations with the Country Fire Authority (CFA) we decided to conduct focus group-based research in Laharum and Wartook areas located in the Grampians. Residents in these areas were directly threatened by the January 2006 fires.

People living in the area represent diverse social groups. Some residents are land owners who have been there for generations and farm sheep and crops and have a close affinity with the fire history of the area. Many of these residents are likely to be active volunteers in the CFA. Others are land owners who have non traditional farms such as olive or wildflower farms and who normally have little or no affiliation with the CFA. Another distinctive group is the tourist operators whose financial interest depends on attracting tourism dollars to the area. A final group of residents is the 'tree changers' who left the cities and moved to the area seeking an eco-sustainable lifestyle. Some residents in the area have close links with Parks Victoria, the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) or the CFA while others who have recently moved from the city had no previous experience of bushfires before the 2006 summer.⁷

This social diversity meant that we would expect to find a broad range of understandings, interests and views of the role of the media before, during and after the fires. The aim of the focus group sessions was to hear the participants' experiences with, and responses to, the media reporting and to gain a better understanding of the ways local residents used the media before, during and after the fires.

MAIN THEMES EMERGING FROM THE SESSIONS

1. MEDIA AND THE INFORMATION GATHERING PROCESS

One of the most interesting outcomes of the sessions was the use of the media as part of a larger information gathering process. Questions about media use before and during the fires were understood by the participants as questions about the types and sources of information they had accessed. Immediately after the focus group moderator explained that the researchers were interested in their reactions to media coverage before, during and after the fires, one participant asked for clarification:

What exactly do you define as media? Is that anywhere you hear any news about the fire or is it specifically radio, TV, newspapers? (Focus group participant)

It was apparent that participants could not recall where, and what, they heard about the fires. Given that the sessions were conducted almost four months after the event this is not surprising. Yet, it is also clear that for the participants 'the media' were seen as an integral part of larger information / knowledge sources such as newsletters, email lists, various websites, ABC Local Radio and ABC Radio National, local newspapers, CFA radios, community meetings, neighbours, relatives and friends from the city calling in, fire agencies' publications, the police and other government agencies. In that sense 'the media' was not clearly identified as an information source or a social institution that stands separately from other, both formal and informal, information sources.

When talking about the media, one participant referred to the availability of information from a wide range of sources as one of the most important aspects of dealing with the fires.

A positive part has been the availability of various services. Not just what was done but the availability of it. The availability of printed matter, availability of the TV coverage, and that was

quite late because of the type of media it is, but it still happened, availability of word of mouth, local word of mouth, people passing information on, the availability of the neighborhood 'fire watch' that we have here and so on. (Focus group participant)

Participants acknowledge both the media and fire agencies as sources of broader information about bushfires. Such information is available due to past experiences of fire and as a direct outcome of some media organisations' and fire agencies' long-term work with the community over the years.

I think this year there was an abundance of materials available for people to put their fire prevention plan in order. I noticed that there was a lot of emphasis on training or preparing people whether you are going to stay and fight or whether you are going to leave the area. That message came through quite strong. A lot of that material was available well before the fire this year, more than most years. (Focus group participant)

We also found that participants were used to making careful judgments about the quality of information they received. Far from being passive recipients of media images and official messages, the media, and for that matter any other sources of information, are 'judged' by the quality and usability of the information provided. It is in this context that we can understand statements like:

ABC [Local] Radio is the only one that was doing anything for anybody because it was keeping us up to date. If it wasn't for the ABC [Local Radio] then ... because everybody was busy doing their own things. (Focus group participant)

Most participants acknowledged ABC Local Radio as the main, and at times, only source of 'useable' information. Clearly, the need for relevant and timely information is most acute during the fires. Media reports are perceived to 'do something' or be 'useful' when they are able to facilitate or execute an appropriate response from the community and the individuals who are facing the approaching fire.

The radio [local ABC] before the fire, and as the fire was approaching, was very good and informative. In particular when we called the alert we had a really good turn up so obviously it

worked. We were called to action and the radio was important for getting everyone here [to the community meeting]. (Focus group participant)

It could be argued that just before and during the fires residents are proactively searching for information (from any source) they can utilise for their particular needs. For some this meant listening to the conversations of fire fighters and their controllers on CFA radios.

A lot of us have listening sets so we are actually listening to what is going on in the fire tracks or from the fire stations. So a lot of us knew more about the fire from what we heard here than from the media. Some people may actually get confused as to where they got the message from. (Focus group participant)

For this participant the CFA listening set provided unmediated access to information about fires in the vicinity.

The positive or informative sides of the local media are often contrasted with the more sensationalised sides of televised and national media reports. One participant recalled her shock when she first watched the images of the fires on television:

Well, we don't have TV and we evacuated for a few days and we then saw television reports at our neighbour's house and we couldn't believe it. It was so sensational. We thought, this is not our fire! (Focus group participant)

Another participant expressed his anger at TV reporting that he saw as an attempt to capitalise on the fires instead of exercising community responsibility by providing audiences with specific information about the fires.

TV was useless. It's tabloid. It's generics. It's more about attracting attention than it is about informing. TV in the time of the crisis was a dead loss. They've got a completely different agenda. Their agenda is to attract attention not to inform. So I didn't even bother watching ... That bit that I saw was, well, they went to air with the biggest flame, or the most spectacular helicopter, forget the rest. (Focus group participant)

The following statement explains, therefore, the appreciation of the local media response to the fires in contrast to what participants see as the 'vicious sides' of city based media.

The [local] papers and the [local] radio both took a positive point of view. They weren't blaming people. They talked about the damage but it wasn't ... it would have been easy to go the way they go on half past six news shows in the city where they tear everybody down and show everything that's wrong but that didn't happen with the fires. (Focus group participant)

The local media, therefore, are seen to be closer to the community, their concerns, and their needs.

Furthermore, it is important to note that radio and in particular the ABC Local Radio is not only perceived to be the most informative and useful information provider due to its content and delivery styles but also thanks to the nature of the medium itself.⁸ Radio is perceived to be one of the best means to enable individuals to stay connected while doing other things or when they find themselves extremely busy getting ready for the approaching fire. A key feature here is the portability of radio sets.

What I want to add is that we get more information from the radio because I can keep going with my job that I am doing in the workshop or in the house or wherever and still listen. Because of the type of the media it retains in your memory better than the visual presentations. As for printed matter, the newspapers, the Mail Times are always a day late. I don't get my paper until midday. In the weekend I get nothing at all. We rely greatly on radio.

During the day of the fires I went to get my battery radio to carry with me around when I work and saw that the battery had gone and then I dropped the bloody thing and it broke to pieces. I immediately went to Horsham and bought a solar powered radio which is going fantastic. This was my way of getting a radio that is going all the time. The radio is the most user friendly media because you can have it running and still do other things. (Focus group participant)

Clearly, there are limitations to warnings delivered on the media. As fire gets closer and the nature of the threat changes, as one

participant explains, the only source of information is the people around you who are experiencing the reality of the event as it is happening.

This is something that will always happen. When the fire just started you can rely on television or newspapers because the fires are just around. At this stage everything is calm and you have time to prepare or whatever. But I think there is time when it is so close that the only reliable information is your local neighbours or the people in the fire trucks and even they might be behind it.

I don't know what you can do about it because at a moment like that things goes so fast and it is so different that it is very hard to keep track of the reality. I think that is also what happened during the community meeting we had. When they started the meeting on Tuesday night they had some information that the fire is out there but then when things changed and at the end of it, it was like, go home fast! Now! Because (Everyone laughs). I don't know how you can solve it. It comes to a stage that all you've got is the locality. The further you go away from it the more unreliable non-factual stories are what you'll get. (Focus group participant)

This final comment bears out a significant theme in the discussions: that, on the whole, in relation to rural fires, the closer the media source is to the particular community, the more trustworthy and credible it is perceived to be.

To make their use of the information broadcast on the radio more effective some participants suggested that radio broadcasters should provide regular updates.⁹

During the fires the ABC [Local Radio] and our local radio should have 10 minutes hourly, or set a fixed time to broadcast regular information updates. We totally rely on the radio, not on the telephone or our mobile phones or whatever. Everybody listens to the radio with their little transistors. It is important that they will have regular reports at set times so we can listen to. This should be happening everywhere in Victoria when there is an intense fire no matter where you are. (Focus group participants)

In supporting the above suggestion, another participant talked about the difficulties in filtering media reports in order to get the messages that are most relevant to you personally.

I listen to the radio but even though it was positive to hear information about the fires I joked that I should put a bottle of glue near the radio, because sometimes you are glued to the radio, just waiting and waiting to hear a snippet of information. This was important this time given that the wind was so erratic. I wanted to know: Did the wind change direction? Which way was it going now?

Even in terms of your fire plan if you are just sitting by the radio waiting, essentially you are trying to filter out all the noise that you are not interested in because you are waiting for that fire bulletin to come through, so you can then run around and maybe pull water into your gutters and .. So yes the radio is good, but I strongly agree that it is better if there were regular scheduled updates. (Focus group participant)

Another participant who argued that the radio was the only medium capable of delivering information during the fires expressed the need for specific information that relates to specific areas as the situation develops and changes.

Reports on the radio were by far the best media for us to be kept informed but they really ought to give regular scheduled reports. As a listener you should know that on the hour or every half hour you can hear what the latest update is. Obviously they'll need to break in if there is an emergency change in the situation. That was one of the things that I asked for at the community meeting we had here. That the incident controllers make sure that the ABC [Local Radio] be kept abreast and that they would undertake to break-in to their ordinary broadcasting if it is necessary to give out the information.

I think there ought to be more predictions of what the fires do. The wind direction and what the weather changes are likely to be. They need to tell us which areas or which fronts of the fire's are going to be the most vigorous and put people under most pressure. These things, for the local people, are far more important than any generic information. We need to know that 'it's burning toward Smith road and that people of the South will have an ember attack now!' (Focus group participant)

The information which is gathered is evaluated according to its 'usefulness' at the particular moment as the situation changes and

develops. Residents are aware of the need to know what is going on, to get the 'real' picture, in order to be able to make the right decision. This is crucial in Victoria where agencies adopt the 'stay and defend, or go early' policy which asks residents to decide whether they intend to stay and defend their homes or leave early before the fire gets too close.¹⁰ For this policy to be feasible it requires that the decision to 'stay or go' must be based on accurate and timely information and early preparation. Media reports, and for that matter all other sources of information, are evaluated on the basis of their ability to deliver or provide such 'usable' information as the situation changes.

The following comment reveals how individuals may shift between different information sources in relation to their evaluation of the event and their particular needs

There was a moment that I thought, and I cannot remember which newspaper or who was actually reporting it, but there was a moment when the fire was reported to be north of Halls Gap. At that stage I was unsure where the fire may come from, if there is suddenly a wind change. I wasn't sure what to do. These are the moments that you think 'if I only had just the facts'. 'If I only knew where the fire is it would make things much clearer'. For a long time we relied on ABC [Local] Radio and then at a certain moment we decided that is not precise anymore so now we use the internal CFA radio and our neighbours and what we heard in the community meeting.
(Focus group participant)

In the context of relevant and usable information there were some disagreements within the groups about the importance of radio 'talkback'.¹¹ Talkback was contrasted to the broadcasting of official agency information or authoritative 'warnings' that are broadcast in the media. Some participants argued that talkback was 'informative' because it provided an opportunity to hear the stories and the experiences of other members of the community who were facing the same situation. Yet, others stated that the problem with 'talkback' was that it was in fact 'useless' and potentially dangerous,

as one participant argued: 'Asking people who know nothing to give their opinion, is totally unproductive'.

The following participants describe listening to both the informative and the 'talkback' sections as part of their overall media use during the fires.

I liked the radio with the updates every time something was happening. And I also liked it when they had the talkback segments and people who had been involved in the fires could ring in and say that it gone past them and that there were so many firefighters... (Focus group participant)

Another participant had a similar argument and described the way hearing other people's stories actually helped her make up her own mind in knowing what to do if she faces a similar situation.

I like it actually when people rang and said how they were involved in it and how they got out. It wasn't sensational. Some of the local people who were involved in the fires talked on the radio and said how they got out and thanks for everything, and you can actually base your ideas of evacuation on what people who had to evacuate did. (Focus group participant)

In responding to these comments another participant argued that it is important to distinguish between the 'informative' and the 'talkback' sections that may, according to his view, place listeners at risk.

I want to get back to the matter of radio and talkback. I think that first hand knowledge stuff is good but uninformed opinion is really bad as it starts rumors. The sort of things that you hear people say, 'I heard that so and so...'. I think that they [the media] really need to monitor it or supervised it in some ways. We were given stories about burning kangaroos hopping out of the bush to the grass land and set it on fire and all this sort of nonsense and that doesn't really help people manage their psychological situation when it is hard to form an opinion. Talkback gives people an opportunity to express their opinions or interact or feel part of the community but it has the danger of a lot of uninformed opinions on it. They [the media] are more interested in human interest stories than they are in informing people. (Focus group participant)

Such statements express personal experiences, personal tastes and feelings about different media formats, however, the distinction made here between mere 'opinions' and 'information' is something fire agencies and, in particular, talkback presenters, ought to address when talking about a situation where listeners try to get specific 'information'.¹²

Another issue with 'opinions' versus 'information', apart from the fear of wrong or misinformed opinions, is the feeling that talkback enables different players to promote a particular agenda or interests.

Some of the talkback radio as distinct from the news reports was just wrong. People ring in with axes to grind and they have got wrong information. The problem, as I see it, is that when there are people interviewed on the radio for a comment that's fine, but then they [the media] should go to the fire controller or the person who actually knows what happens and get the correct information. It is the same with the newspapers. They want to sell newspapers they don't care about anything but selling newspapers. So they don't really care how factual their information is. I used to write letters to the editors but I don't do it anymore because it gets used and twisted. (Focus group participant)

In a broader sense the argument about 'talkback' is about the ways listeners attempt to classify and evaluate what they hear on the radio. The next section looks at the importance of local knowledge in evaluating the information delivered in the media.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE IN DELIVERING EFFECTIVE INFORMATION

Local knowledge and the lack of local knowledge emerged as one of the most important aspects of information broadcast to the community. Possession of local knowledge is assumed to be one of the main advantages that local media have over the State based media. The latter are believed to be lacking such knowledge and to

have no real interest in, or time to learn about, the locality. Yet, there was also a realisation that State based media may provide local listeners with the 'bigger picture' of what is happening throughout the State.

The local [radio] station talks to the local fire controllers and they discuss it on the radio, so you get the absolute reality of what happens then and there and what the future is. But when they go to Melbourne [when ABC Local Radio 594 shifts the reporting back to Melbourne] they don't actually discuss it with the fire controllers here but with the CFA controller in Melbourne. However, the Melbourne based coverage did give you feedback on other fires – the broader approach gave you a feedback on the bigger picture. (Focus group participant)

Residents have been accumulating local knowledge about fires in the area for years. Participants argued that one of the most effective ways of communication was in fact 'word of mouth' and strong community relations. The possession of such knowledge plays an important role in preparing for, and fighting, local fires and in evaluating media performance. A media report that lacks such knowledge is noticed immediately.

Before the fire was coming I thought the ABC Local Radio was really good, especially early in the morning. Their fire updates including their weather reports were really excellent. But sometimes I noticed that they said 'Wartook is at risk' but what they actually meant was that 'local Wartook is at risk' and not the area of Wartook. It is not the report itself but sometimes the people who are reading the reports have no idea about the area. Like getting the road names all wrong and other such things. Mostly it was really good but there were things they could have tidied up. (Focus group participant)

A similar example was of media reports and warnings that were not specific enough. This again indicates for the listeners that there is no real understanding of the local area.

They forget when they are in the country and they say a name of a place that they are not talking about a little town. They talk about Wartook or Laharam and they say the fire has reached Wartook, they forget they are talking about an area that could be 20 kilometres by 20 kilometres. It's too vague. (Focus group participant)

Some other participants believed that the responsibility for such mistakes was often not with the media but with the fire agencies who delivered the information to the media. The lack of local knowledge was the main test in evaluating the reliability of the information delivered. Furthermore, as we can see in the following example, delivering information that lacks local knowledge can be very stressful for local listeners who are totally dependent on the information they hear in the media.

Some of the incident controllers weren't familiar with the area. They talked to the media saying where the fire is. You are listening to the radio and it says the fire is reaching Mt Zero Road. And I think, my goodness, that's where I am in. But it was miles away. If they had said that they were referring to Mt. Zero Road at the Halls Gap end it would have been a lot clearer. Obviously, they weren't from around here. I am living on my own and I am thinking 'oh well', you know, 'what shall I do? Should I start preparing for evacuation?' (Focus group participant)

Another participant describes the tensions that exist between the familiar locality and the way 'reality' is being constructed in the media. Familiarity with the locality leads listeners and viewers to mistrust media reports that are now revealed to be a mere construction that has little to do with the experienced reality.

This is probably the first time that we are part of the news. Things happening among you that will be reported in the local but also in state newspapers and even overseas. I think what shocked me most was to see how different the stories in the media are from your own reality. Even in factual things like the weather and where the fire is, they make mistakes. It taught me something about the reliability of the media. Basically an article in the newspaper is something you shouldn't trust. Even if it is not plain wrong it is not completely right. (Focus group participant)

Such criticism is similar to the point made earlier about some media being more sensational than others and so far less 'useable' as a reliable information source. As with the comment above some participants recall an example during the fires where the wrong

information was been broadcast for hours without anyone correcting the mistake.

On one account on the radio during the afternoon they kept saying that the Western Highway goes through Halls Gap. (Everyone laughs, agreeing). Someone probably started to say it and they kept on repeating it on and on about the fire at the Western Highway at Halls Gap and it took a while before they corrected it. This was excruciating for me to hear it. When you know your environment you think, how can they get it so wrong? (Focus group participant)

In the context of the Grampians area participants describe confusion in relation to road names and different maps being used by different agencies. This is a serious problem for locals and outsiders who may not be familiar with the particular local history and may not recognise the specific roads or places described in the official warnings and other messages.¹³

I find it amazing that they have three different names for the same road and that they use some old maps during the event. That sort of thing, you would think, could be organised beforehand. (Focus group participant)

Another participant explains the particular local history in the Grampians that led to such confusions:

They were going to give it one name and we actually found that some old maps had three Grampians Roads. It really depends to which map you look at, which name this road will have. (Focus group participant)

The poor quality and use of maps was also reported to be problematic during the community meetings and even in the email updates that some of the people received.¹⁴

They gave me a map of the area that they were going to burn off just in front of my place. And I was so confused. The old Winfield road was called Plantation Road and I guess they based it on something. But does anyone here know when was this road called Plantation road? It must have been years ago. And there was an escape route that goes right up to the bush and another escape route that was actually on a dead-end road. (Focus group participant)

A particular issue in the context of Wartook and Laharum locality is what participants in the focus group saw as the media focus on Halls Gap. The media was accused of being 'Halls Gap centric' in the sense that most journalists were located there and talked about the fire as if it was mainly threatening Halls Gap, the most recognised town in the Grampians. As one participant argues, when explaining the way the 'locality' of the Grampians is often perceived by outsiders,

Halls Gap is not the Grampians. Grampians is 100 kilometres long and 50 kilometres wide. It is not one kilometre that way one kilometre that way and that's it – that's the end of the Grampians. It is not. It is a hundred kilometres long and that's why we get annoyed when Halls Gap gets everything, the rest of the Grampians gets nothing. That's what annoys the daylight out of us. (Focus group participant)

Halls Gap is the hub for out of town visitors to the Grampians, many of them coming from Melbourne. The Melbourne / State based media interest in the area was therefore focused on Halls Gap. To the frustration of locals living in other areas in the Grampians, Halls Gap was now receiving most of the media attention and was perceived to be the area most affected by the fire.

The problem was that once they [the media] heard that there was a fire in the Grampians it was, for them, at Halls Gap. It was more sensational to say that it is at Halls Gap. So a place like ours wasn't really reported on very often because the fire is in the Grampians and that is Halls Gap! The perception of where the fire was, was in fact very poor. We knew it was burning towards us but they [the media] kept reporting it was at Halls Gap. (Focus group participant)

This was of particular concern to our focus group participants after the fires. Their feeling was that the media exposure and the large public interest in Halls Gap meant that fire agencies themselves seemed to be responding and directing most of their efforts toward this particular town.

A lot of publicity and stuff put out by Parks Victoria was very Halls Gap centric. For example the road closures and the media

release they sent out, rather than delivering accurate information it was more, in my view at least, motivated by their own political self-interest. Maybe they had their reasons for doing it but I see it as weakness. In relation to reporting about the recovery process I believe all media outlets were pretty poor and too Halls Gap focused. (Focus group participant)

This is how one participant describes the effect on his business of the media focus on Halls Gap

Halls Gap was not getting more attention but getting all the attention! The fire was not even contained when the Ministers' met in Halls Gap. Now, it took more than a month to open road next to us. We were the sacrificial lambs to keep everything going in Halls Gap. I think the priority should have been to open all the roads in our area. Their drive was to make the Jazz Festival go. The Festival was going to be in two weeks time and what they feared was that if they open the roads there may have people running around all over the place. I don't mind being the sacrificial lamb but we didn't even get the acknowledgement. Instead our business been gutted. It really cost me a fortune. (Focus group participant)

However, as another participant noted, people in Halls Gap may have a very different perception of both the media reports and the recovery phase. This insight is probably correct but it also indicates how even within such small communities diverse interests may shape both the communities and the individuals' responses and understanding of the fires, the images and the warnings promoted in the media.

The sense focus group participants had that their locality was neglected was especially difficult because of a feeling that the media move on very quickly once the immediate crisis was over.

My main issue with the media was not during the fire but shortly after. The week following the fire there were still a lot of burning going on but you didn't hear about it anymore. It was very hard to find any information at all. The ABC [Local Radio] forgot about it and the websites didn't update things often enough. We had fire trucks running through our property every few hours because there were still breaks here and there. We knew things were happening but we could no longer pick up the CFA radio. That was really frustrating because you really don't know what to do and you still want precise up-to-date information. We

wanted information that was relevant to us! It was interesting to read the statistics as they came out with so many sheep burnt to death and so many kilometres of fences burnt but you think, what about our corner? That's very hard of course but that's what ... well the media lost interest but we were still in it. (Focus group participant)

We will now discuss how the issue of media being 'Halls Gap centric' was crucial to local perceptions of the recovery phase. Focus group participants felt that, apart from the damage caused by the actual fires, it was media reports about the fires that most harmed their livelihoods and hindered the recovery, a rather long process that involves the economic livelihood, communal and psychological aspects as well as the protection of life and property from future fire events.

3. VARIOUS EFFECTS OF MEDIA COVERAGE – BEFORE, DURING AND POST FIRE

In addition to issues of fire preparedness and the delivery of relevant and specific information, focus group participants believed that the media coverage of the fires had a range of other consequences. These consequences were both immediate and long lasting and involved local community members attempting to influence or control media coverage, particularly in relation to economic aspects of recovery. This began during the fires and continued long after. Concerns about the media coverage were expressed by participants whose livelihood depends on tourism. These individuals, but also other residents living in the area, were quite aware that the images and narratives of the fires promoted in the media (and in this context mainly State media) have the ability to promote or hinder their local communities.

Actually, the newspapers have been a real disservice because they reported fires across the Grampians. Even areas that were not that affected by the fire lost a lot of tourists and business because they've [the tourists] all read the papers saying that the

fires are in the Grampians. It is the State wide and Australian wide newspapers that are doing a real disservice to some of the people here. They are not specific enough. This was not so much the case in this fire but in previous fires. They [the media] often put out publicity that Halls Gap was at risk, when the fire was really here; this was about five years ago. The newspapers in Melbourne all reported that Halls Gap was at risk. It was nowhere near at risk and yet everybody who had booking to Halls Gap cancelled.¹⁵ What you do? What do you do about misreporting like that? You feel like suing them but you cannot get anywhere with that. It does hurt a lot of people misreporting but the newspapers don't seem to take it on. Poor reporting has affected lots of businesses. It really is a media issue. (Focus group participant)

Loss of tourism income was one of the main topics to emerge during the sessions. In a way this topic, more than any of the others, reflects current community concerns about the recovery process four months after the event. This has affected most residents and businesses that depend on tourist money. Just before we commenced the focus group session the moderator was chatting to the participants causally asking, 'Do you get many people out here this time of year when it is a bit colder?' The overall response was, 'Well, we used to have tourists coming before the fires'. As became evident later in the discussions the main thing believed to influence the tourists coming or not coming to the area were the images of the fires reported in the media.

Given how sensationalist the television coverage was, the images that stick with everyone are the large flames of the fires. This has a real effect on the tourism business. The lasting image everyone has is that the Grampians has just burnt down. It doesn't help that Parks Victoria took so long to open the roads that if you read the print media a month later there are still reports of roads closed down or that only a limited number of walks are open. That conveys the impression that it is still dangerous and there is no point coming here ... Even though 40% of the Park is burnt we still got an enormous area that people can use and they just don't know about it. That's why they [Park Victoria] had to have a special advertising campaign because the way people perceived the reports in the media was 'the Grampians National Park is burnt, don't go and see it'. (Focus group participant)

In one focus group there was a feeling that paradoxically the community's excellent response to the fire itself, while being very effective, has not prevented the damage caused by media reporting of the fires and the attention given to Halls Gap.

The crucial thing, and I think we sort of hit on it, is that the leading up to the fire was crucial. The local people did come in, we managed to get the messages out, and we called people into action and put our fire plans in. Overall, you can say, we responded very well. But we've been given a horrible disservice since. In the sense the reasons our area was not burnt out and destroyed was because our good prevention and hard work. Yet, now what actually affect us aren't the fires but it's basically the recovery of Halls Gap. This is affecting all our businesses. They are getting everything. So we weren't affected by the fires we've been affected by the recovery of Halls Gap. They've got so much coverage that people rocked in there by their thousands. But our roads stayed closed for six weeks and that just killed us. (Focus group participant)

In attempting to promote their particular interests and protect potential financial damage residents and business established a 'media group' for lobbying both fire agencies and the media in getting their 'messages out'.

People in our media group were absolutely fed up because there was no mention of the Wartook area after the fires. I actually contacted the CFA, Parks Victoria and the DSE and asked them to make sure that we be included. I was getting really upset about it. I got a response from the headquarters in Horsham and they saw my point and decided, because there were a lot of media people wanting to do stories, to send a few of them down here. The problem was that because of road closures they gave them the most ridiculous route of getting here. By the time they got here they were really frustrated because they had spent almost two and half hours getting here. From there on the focus just wasn't on this area at all. (Focus group participant)

It is likely that there are many other such examples whereby residents or communities in particular areas may attempt their own 'media management' for promoting or protecting their local interests.

Media reporting is therefore not only relevant in the context of delivering warnings and community information but is also understood and used by residents and the fire agencies themselves as a space where the promotion of particular interests (political, financial and others) is played out. This aspect is clearly most crucial after the fires have been extinguished and when communities and individuals need to deal seriously with the long term effects of the fires.

Following the fire we hadn't had enough publicity from any of the media on recovery. Once the crisis is over, whether there is still a crisis in our community or not, it is dropped. It should be responsibility of the agencies and of the local media to keep people up-to-date. Who has been contacted about rehabilitation? There were few public notices in the paper, 'we are thinking of doing this ...', but that's not enough, unless people are specifically looking for it they wouldn't know about it. (Focus group participant)

This last point is an example of the complexity of media use and relationships between media organisations with their audiences. A feeling that local media listen to and may help the recovery process can go a long way in establishing further trust and a strong sense of community and locality that can be highly beneficial before, during and after the fires.

4. OTHER ISSUES - COMMENTS ABOUT FIRE AGENCIES WEBSITES AND THE INFORMATION LINE

Other issues that emerged in the focus group discussions that are not directly related to the media included reference to the use of the internet as a source of information during the fire. This was in the form of personal emails, various email updates, fire agencies and media websites. Internet use was varied and the main complaints were about agencies' websites not updating their information or not being accessible at all. The sending of maps in

email updates was especially problematic as, due to slow connections, these took too long to download.

No less important were complaints about the Victorian Bushfires Information Line. Almost all media reports and warnings ended with a call to listeners to call the 1 800 number in case they need to get more information. Yet when trying to make the call participants found that they were put on hold for a long time and those who managed to get through discovered that the Information Line could not provide any further information than what was already on the media or the agencies websites. As one participant explains:

The fire information line was a dead loss. They would continue to ask us to ring up and find out if we had any questions. Well first of all it was inaccessible. You were on hold all the time. That was hopeless, they might as well not have it at all. And they kept referring to it: 'if you want more information ring such and such' for hours and days they did that and you were on hold for 20 minutes or an hour. In fact this was a distraction we could have done without. We gave up. It was hopeless and they should be told that. Not only that it was congested and you couldn't get onto it, they also couldn't give you any more information. They couldn't answer specific questions and they had to refer to somewhere else and often it was the police.
(Focus group participant)

Another issue that emerged towards the end of one of the sessions was complaints about receiving too many calls from friends and relatives in the city. While there is a positive element in people communicating and passing information about the fire to each other¹⁶ many found such calls quite hard to handle when they were very busy getting ready to face the fire. According to Ian Mannix while the ABC support this approach they didn't encourage it much in this case. It is likely, however, that many of the calls would have come from concerned relatives and friends listening to reports about the fire.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the focus group sessions was to identify participants' media use during the fires. The sessions reveal that the media are major sources of information during fires. During such times the need is for relevant and specific 'information'. Distinctions are made in regards to different media, their availability and their ability to deliver information.

The further a media outlet is from the locality the less relevant and accurate the information that is delivered becomes. A lack of local knowledge leads people to disregard the messages and may cause unnecessary stress and misinterpretations, that can result in dangerous or inappropriate responses.

Effects of the media reporting about the fires on communities are both immediate and long lasting. While it may be difficult to engage media interest in the less dramatic aspects of fire and the long process of recovery this is an area that fire agencies definitely need to take into account. Community feelings that fire agencies (and for that matter the media) are not interested or are not part of the recovery process may potentially harm the agencies relationship with the communities both in the preparation for and during the response to fires.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- Information gathering process is a broader and dynamic process that involves many different sources of information. A comprehensive communication strategy needs to acknowledge this reality.
- Local knowledge is the most important aspect of the information delivered. Lack of such knowledge is immediately noticed and may lead to lost of credibility and trust.

- Media effects of fire reporting are immediate and long lasting. It is important that agencies monitor such effects when conducting post incidents research.
- More efforts to communicate with media and the affected communities should be conducted as part of the recovery process.

ENDNOTES

¹ The reference to the ABC Local Radio throughout the paper is in relation to ABC Radio Western Victoria 594 and at times to ABC Local Radio 774 in Melbourne. ABC Local Radio is separate divisions with ABC radio. Other ABC divisions (For example Radio National, Classic FM and Triple Jay) all can be heard locally but none carried fire coverage.

² Cohen, E., Hughes, P., & White, P. B. (2006) The Media and Fire Services – Public relations and community information: A Victorian view. (Bushfires and the Media: Report No. 2). *Bundoora: La Trobe University*.

Cohen, E., Hughes, P., & White, P. B (2006) Reporting Bushfires: What motivates the media? (Bushfires and the Media: Report No. 3). *Bundoora: La Trobe University*.

³ See for example the following articles:

McKay, J. M. (1983) 'Newspaper Reporting of Bushfire Disaster in South Eastern Australia - Ash Wednesday 1983.' *Disasters* 7(3): 283-91.

McKay, J. M. (1996) 'Reflecting the hazard or restating old views: newspapers and bushfires in Australia.' *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 14(3): 305-319.

Ewart, J. (2002) 'Prudence not Prurience: A Framework for Journalists Reporting Disasters', Australia New Zealand Communication Association (ANZCA) Online Journal - <http://www.bond.edu.au/hss/communication/ANZCA/journpg5.htm>

⁴ Cohen, E., Hughes, P., & White, P. B (2006) 'Battling ferocious flames: bushfires in the media' *Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, Vol. 21 No. 1 (47-52).

⁵ This information is based on data collected by Horsham Fire District (CFA and DSE).

⁶ ABC signed the similar such agreement nationally in early 2003 with Emergency Management Australia (EMA). The process now moved across the whole of Australia signing Memorandum of Understanding with a whole range of emergency agencies. Such agreements are not restricted to ABC Local Radio but extend to the use of national radio and television plus on-line services too. Furthermore, the ABC is not seen as the only medium for official broadcast messages. There is an ongoing process developing all-hazard broadcast guidelines for all emergency agencies and all media. The Guidelines include use of commercial and public radio and of all the television networks including PayTV.

⁷ This general information was provided by a local CFA employee who is familiar with the community. To get a clearer picture on the local residents' identities, employment and social structure a more detailed survey is needed.

⁸ The importance of local radio for delivering specific warning is recognised by most fire agencies in Australia. See for example a recent debate on ABC radio about the introduction of a privately mobile phone bushfire alert system. <http://www.abc.net.au/newcastle/stories/s1630919.htm>

⁹ According to ABC Local Radio Victoria internal policies during fire listeners should be updated at regular intervals, the timing depending on the severity of the fire. An internal survey conducted by the ABC on the 'Rocky Den fire, April 2005 in Digby makes a similar point:

Listeners did not know precisely when the next fire updates were going to occur, and either tuned out looking for information from other sources (ie: commercial radio or the internet), or were not concentrating when the updates were broadcast. Radio broadcasters can overcome this problem with better forward promotion of projected interviews and updates.

In the context of the Grampians Fire, according to Ian Mannix, ABC Local Radio provided coverage of every major outbreak but did not have 'regular updates' despite this being their plan. As he explains – 'We have decided that with similar fires in the future we will try to be more 'local' but like all major disasters, if they are too vast we

will have to network at some stage because like all agencies we don't have the staff to cover this in detail.'

¹⁰ There are some researchers in the Bushfire CRC who are currently looking at different aspects of this policy. See for example: Handmer, J. & Tibbits, A. 2005, 'Is staying at home the safest option during bushfires? Historical evidence for the Australian approach', *Environmental Hazards* Vol. 6, Issue 2, p. 81-91.

¹¹ Talkback radio emerges as an important issue in the previous stages of the research. Both journalists and fire agencies personnel saw it as a media format that is crucial for delivering information (formal and informal) and a place whereby community expectations are expressed. Further research on talkback radio during fires is important.

¹² Interestingly, Local ABC Radio Victoria acknowledges the importance of talkback radio during fires and employs internal regulations that aim to minimise potential risks.

4. Note: listeners should not be able to gain the impression that talkback callers are authorities on fires or evacuations. Talkback callers must not be encouraged to give descriptions of roads, rate of travel of the fire; or any other sensitive information which could be relied on by other listeners in an emergency situation. (Local Radio Emergencies, 2005)

It may be possible to encourage other radio stations to follow a similar procedure.

¹³ There is a need to remember that while our focus group participants were all local residents it is likely that those who were listening to the media reports and warnings during the fires were also temporary visitors such as tourists and those merely passing through along the nearby Western Highway.

¹⁴ According to Ian Mannix the ABC ask the CFA for two years for a set of maps to use, but they contain personal and private information which they cannot, under privacy laws, distribute to other agencies.

¹⁵ The reference is to previous fire events. There is no doubt that during the 2006 fires Halls Gap was in grave risk from the fires in the National Park.

¹⁶ The ABC Digby report mentioned above recommends to:

Consider occasionally telling listeners to phone or visit people in the area to warn them about the disaster, because not everyone will be listening to the radio. (Be careful of causing panic and congesting lines). The number of residents who said: 'Someone will call me' or 'I didn't know what was going on' shows that they are expecting the community to take responsibility during these events, and it might be worth pursuing as a role of ABC Radio.