

Sustainability Committee

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Evidence from the BBC

Floods Review – 2007- BBC Nations & English Regions Reponse

Section a

Summary provided by Ian Cameron, BBC, to the Pitt Review.

Text in blue relates to updates since this report was written.

- The public were best served when Emergency Services were proactive and invited the BBC into Gold/Silver control so we could supply fast accurate information. Where this happened, Radio Stations said there was a mutual benefit as the Emergency Services didn't have to waste time doing extra press interviews. This issue was first flagged up after the York floods in 2000 and was the main catalyst for 'Connecting in a Crisis'. However some areas blocked our presence at the control centres despite prior assurances at Local Resilience Forum (LRF) or Regional Media Emergency Forum (RMEF) meetings. If we were to face a more serious, immediate threat e.g. in the form of a dirty bomb, speed of communications would be critical. [Since 2007, Ian Cameron from the BBC has raised this issue at the Cabinet Office National Steering Committee for Warning & Informing the Public and he understands the Association of Chief Police Officers, ACPO, have issued new guidance to forces suggesting that a media briefing facility is set up adjacent to Silver control for big incidents.](#)
- The BBC is uniquely placed to connect communities in a crisis, providing real time information on a variety of platforms, Radio, TV, Online & handheld devices such as mobile 'phones. The audience not only expect the BBC to deliver such information - we've been aware of the way the audience gravitate to the BBC in a crisis – but now the audience expect us to make this information available to them on demand at a time of their choosing.
- It would be hard to over emphasise the importance of the interactive nature of our Local Services and the relationship with our audience – in the first 2 hours of a crisis there is much confusion and the public help us build up a picture of what is happening, where it is happening and how it is affecting people. In the digital age the public are no longer prepared to be passive recipients of information – they want to take an active part and they provide us with pictures, text and verbal accounts which come together like pieces of a jigsaw to build a bigger picture. The audience also trust us to filter out misleading or false information such as hoaxes. During the 2007 floods this relationship was vital not just for the first few hours but for days and weeks. [This effect was mirrored during the snow coverage in February 2009. The BBC website](#)

had 5.3 million hits on February 2nd with 35,000 still pictures and 350 bits of video being sent in by the public.

- Looking ahead our main aim would be to move from 'Connecting in a Crisis' to 'Consistency Before a Crisis', to ensure that the public receive the best possible advice and information during a crisis regardless of where they live. To do this we need a consistent approach from both the BBC and the Emergency Responders across the UK and suggest joint cooperation on exercises and rehearsals would help this process. Since 2007 we have started to invite outside agencies to take part in desktop scenario exercises – this includes not just the blue light services but power companies and the Environment Agency.
- From my involvement with NSCWIP etc it seems clear that a future goal is to provide enough information for the public to take more personal responsibility for their safety. Maybe we also need to consider a campaign to forewarn the audience about the frequency & type of information they could reasonably expect if this were to happen again and to have a co-ordinated response where Highways signs, Buses, Ad Shells etc all point staff to our Local BBC Services for real time information ? [In January 2009 BBC Nations & Regions ran a 3-day radio and online campaign called 'What If' which included a series of desktop scenarios about flooding, chemical leaks and pandemic influenza involving broadcasters, emergency responders & the public.](#)

What did you see as your role to the public in terms of providing information during the floods?

Our Local Radio, Online and Regional TV Services follow the recommendations in 'Connecting in a Crisis'. Preservation of Life becomes our number one priority and to do this our main task in the early stages is to provide the audience with the essential information they need to make the right choices about their safety.

This does not mean we abandon our news coverage or our independent questioning role – but in the early stages of an incident we see our main priority to provide vital life saving information to the audience. If there are questions to be asked about strategy or tactics, these can always be asked later.

The regular bulletins of news and information were quickly replaced by a rolling news format to cope with the sheer volume of information that we were receiving from widespread problem areas.

Local Radio stations ran a rolling format with regular information bulletins every 15 mins repeating key information for new listeners.

Some Stations split their output and broadcast a loop of key information e.g. how to clean homes, advice from councils and insurance companies plus updated weather reports on their AM (Medium Wave) transmitter while continuing their real time information on FM.

Regional TV was able to scroll key information along the bottom of the screen during its output and feed information to our network colleagues which could be scrolled on News24, [now known as the News Channel](#).

Local Online information which is prepared in our Local Radio Stations was an essential service in all affected areas as it provided a continuous electronic bulletin board for the community – information on demand.

One Local Radio Manager summed it up as “The Tannoy in the Street “. Another said his listeners described “BBC Local Radio as the 4th Emergency Service “.

Our Local & Regional Newsgathering teams also fed pictures, text and audio material to the wider BBC and this is important for the National or International Audience who may want to know if their friends or relatives are safe – if they can get an accurate picture from the BBC National or International services hopefully they are less likely to bombard the Emergency Services with requests to know if people are safe.

What type of information did you give the public (e.g. stories vs. public service announcements)?

“At the height of the flood threat we were entirely in public service mode. We took the view that the story was the floods “– Local Radio Manager.

News reports concentrated on factual information about what had happened and the effects on the community. However the effects were so great that there were so many questions and answers to disseminate that we had to extend our hours of broadcasting and provide a rolling service of news and information.

People turn to our Local Radio, Online and TV services to get very localised information:

- Will our street, our house be affected? How fast is the water rising?
- Where do we go to be safe – do we go upstairs or should we leave the house?
- Is the Water safe to drink
- Where are the bowsers?
- Are Schools Open or Closed?
- Will the power be turned off – when will it be turned on again?
- Questions about Public Transport, Hospital Appointments, Doctors Surgeries.

But as we mentioned above, the Local Audiences are not passive and they play an active part in connecting the community. We found that this was a constant issue throughout the floods – not just providing information for those directly affected but also answering questions from those not affected who were keen to help. Audience information & offers included:

Drivers providing real time information about roads that were open or closed – often flood water rose so quickly that only callers provided that immediate picture.

Offers of help – e.g. ferrying people to hospital in 4x4s or distributing sandbags/food etc.

We also had to screen out some calls when people said that a road was closed but they managed to get through because we thought it might encourage people to take unnecessary risks.

We also fulfilled another role – providing a medium where people could share their concerns and take comfort from the shared experience, knowing that they were not suffering alone. This was something that we became more aware of as the incident dragged on – especially from the lonely and elderly members of the audience who told us that our broadcasts brought them great comfort. [The Cabinet Office has since published guidelines about vulnerable people and emergencies.](#)

What public service information were you given, by whom? Was it sufficient, accurate, timely, comprehensive, clear, consistent etc.? How could it be improved?

Several stations said it was difficult to get information from Blue Light Services in the early stages of the incidents and that it was the public who became our eyes and ears. This was particularly important in the early stages of the incident because without the public information, in many areas we would not have been able to assess the scale of the disaster.

Several stations said it appeared the Emergency Service Press Officers were swamped in the early stages and could not cope with the huge demand for information. One Fire Service was relying on the efforts of a part-time press officer on the first day.

Many people contacted the BBC Local Services saying we were the only people providing information.

One station praised their Chief Constable for his flexibility and his awareness of the media – timing press conferences to help broadcasters.

However several other Local Radio stations complained that they were denied access to information despite prior assurances at LRF and RMEF meetings when this has been raised in the past.

One of the difficulties of communicating in a crisis is realising at what point you are actually in a crisis. Some Local Radio stations say they weren't even told that Gold or Silver commands were being set up - they said even knowing that the Gold, Silver & Bronze system was being activated would have given them an early warning about the scale of the incident.

Two Radio Stations said there were problems sometimes getting clarification about the scale of the problem – e.g. in terms of the numbers of helicopters involved or the timescale for an evacuation – the perception was that this was due to information bottlenecks in Gold Control or

because the release of information was treated in the same way as the release of legal case-sensitive material.

There was concern that some councils seemed to take so long – several days - to say how many homes were affected.

Questions were also asked about the Environment Agency. It quickly became clear the take up of the EA early warning system varies enormously from area to area – lots of people contacted us asking about flood warnings and they said they couldn't get through to the Environment Agency. [The Environment Agency has since contacted the BBC and area offices are making firm contacts with BBC Local Managing Editors in several areas.](#)

There was also some confusion about terminology from the Environment Agency – One station reported that they were told to “expect a surge on the Thames when it was actually a low rise in water levels “.

Our Local Online Sites also pointed to related sites like the Environment Agency or the Utilities.

In some areas the Utilities told people to go to the BBC Site because their own sites struggled to cope with the volume of hits and they provided our Online team with the information.

The Highways Agency came in for criticism on the night of July 20th when there was a lack of information about the delays on the M50 & M5 near Tewksbury. “We relied on drivers calling our stations to inform us that the motorway was closed and there was a lack of information about when it was opening the following day – again we relied on drivers to provide the information “ – Local Radio Manager.

What improvements could be made to the response to the floods: (a) by emergency responders, and (b) by the public?

We think access to Gold or Silver Control is key for us. Radio Lincolnshire.. “ this was the result of a long process of trust building “ We have been to a ‘wash up’ meeting with Emergency Planning and have been able to give input into improvements in the emergency planning centre ...Wi fi for instance, and access to their data base”. [As mentioned above this has been sorted by ACPO.](#)

The huge volume of information from the public needs to be processed quickly and accurately to sift out hoaxes etc and this information needs to be consistent across the range of our delivery platforms. Our presenters are well versed in separating fact from fiction in live interviews and our journalists live by the ABC mantra, Accuracy, Brevity, and Clarity. The audience trust us to do this filtering – but we do need a better, faster flow of information from the Emergency Services/ Agencies so we can cross check the information from the public.

BBC Nations & Regions is hoping to host a conference in December or January to look at ways of improving communications between the Emergency Services/Planners/Utility Companies and our Local Radio,

Online and TV services. [As mentioned above this happened in January 2008.](#)

Section b

Additional information provided by Ian Cameron

Ian is a member of NSCWIP the Cabinet Office National Steering Committee for Warning & Informing & he is currently studying for a Master Degree in Civil Protection at Leeds University and the Emergency Planning College.

We have invited external partners from the blue light services, Environment Agency, Coastguard and Utilities to come to our desktop exercises so we can understand each others strengths and weaknesses during an emergency, as well as teasing our latent and emerging problems - some of these are listed below.

As well as inviting external responders to join our desktop exercises, News Editors from BBC Wales have also attended exercises run by agencies and Local Authorities in Wales.

Are there any single points of failure in our collective Business Continuity Plans e.g. lots of organisations might plan to ask staff to work from home during an emergency if they have to evacuate their premises – but are there any pinch points on the IT network which might affect computer access if there's high demand on the network.

If communications are affected e.g. if mobile services fail, exercise allow us to build in contingency plans so we can maintain a flow of information between emergency responders and the BBC.

We need to think big – the floods of 2007 were more widespread than anticipated – much emergency planning prior to 2007 assumed incidents would be local in size – i.e. affecting just one Local Radio area – but 2007 made us realise these events could affect several stations in one area which could impact on our resilience measures.

It's important to think about language for warning and informing – words like 'probable' or 'likely' can have different meanings for different people. Involving external partners in our exercises helps this process.

The Audiences which access our services during an emergency are growing exponentially online.

70,000 accessed the BBC Cornwall site in 2005 during the Boscastle floods.

6 months later 3 million people went on the BBC Cumbria site in 3 days when Carlisle was flooded just after Christmas.

During the Buncefield Oil fire, the BBC Nationally had 6,000 e-mails, texts and photos sent in by lunchtime.

On February 2nd 2009, when heavy snow affected large parts of England, there were 5.3 million hits on the main BBC site.

The Online Audiences are not passive – they are interactive and on February 2nd they sent 35,000 still pictures 350 bits of video to the BBC – clearly this raises issues about handling and managing such vast amounts of data for the BBC but it also raises issues for the emergency responders about monitoring output on a variety of platforms, radio, TV, Online so they get they best possible picture of events.

Modern technology, especially cameras on mobile phones mean that the BBC will often be the first to see or hear about an incident, newsgathering can move at a very quick pace however we keep repeating the ABC journalism mantra to our staff – Accuracy, Brevity, Clarity, so our editorial policy guidelines also include advice about using UGC – user generated material – and these guidelines can be viewed through the BBC website.

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