

Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
Answers to Senate Estimates Questions on Notice
Additional Estimates Hearings February 2014
Communications Portfolio
Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Question No: 208

Program No. Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)

Hansard Ref: Page 105 (25/2/2014)

Topic: Emergency Services Broadcasting

Senator Ruston asked:

I want to touch on your emergency services reporting during emergency events. Do you have a policy, or is there a policy that governs your service when you actually become the emergency broadcaster, that says what you can and cannot do in the space of those emergency broadcasts?

Mr Scott: We provide guidance to staff and training to staff. Often we have partnerships with local emergency authorities, so, as they go to a certain scale of alert, we replicate that. That might mean that we will break into programming every 15 minutes or half an hour. At times, if it is very serious we will put a warning signal on; at times, we will put a ticker on the bottom of ABC News 24. This is often spelt out in the partnerships that we have with the emergency authorities.

Senator Ruston: I asked it in the context of myself being in a bushfire area and I was using your ABC station for regular updates. The only concerning thing that came out of it was the journalist or broadcaster would be speaking to the local CFS fire person who would be there and they then might be speaking to somebody in the fire brigade or whatever or they might be speaking to the Bureau of Meteorology. They would then bounce to Johnny Appleseed, who was out there with his hose putting water on its roof. In the same breath without any context you did not actually know that the guy from the BOM and the guy from the emergency services or the fire brigade were giving authorised information that the people needed to be take note of. But little Johnny Appleseed out there, who was obviously pretty upset because he could see some flames coming through to his house, was giving emotional information. I wondered if there was any ruling around, when you become the emergency broadcaster, what you can and cannot do.

Mr Scott: Let me provide a more detailed answer on notice for you on that. It is an issue that we are conscious of. We are very conscious of it online because the online environment creates more of an opportunity for our audience to respond. We really are quite clear in our online coverage what are official verified reports and what is information or input that is coming from our audiences that we have not been able to check or clarify. That distinction is important. I would hope in the flow of our broadcasting we make it quite clear who is official, when we are simply taking talk back calls—insights and observations from our audience—and where that distinction is. Your observations in a sense as a listener are valuable ones for us, and I would like to feed that back into our team.

Answer:

The ABC is committed to providing accurate and timely information to its audiences across each of its platforms in times of natural disasters and emergency events.

The ABC's Emergency Broadcast Policy was developed in close consultation with emergency agencies and the Bureau of Meteorology to ensure successful emergency broadcasts. In addition, each State and Territory (with the exception of South Australia) has an agreement with the relevant emergency services provider about the way warnings are disseminated to the public.

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An emergency broadcast on ABC Radio, most usually Local Radio, is identified to the audience by the use of ABC emergency alerts and themes. The broadcast of all official emergency warnings is undertaken in consultation with the emergency services. Once an emergency is declared, emergency broadcasting takes precedence over other content, with the exception of ABC News bulletins.

As a matter of protocol, ABC Radio broadcasts 'Watch and Act' messages every 30 minutes and 'Emergency Warnings' every 15 minutes, subject to the nature and progression of the event. Emergency warnings may also be broadcast on other ABC radio networks, ABC Television and News24. Emergency warnings are also issued concurrently by the ABC on social media, mirroring those issued on Local Radio.

In the event of prolonged and complex emergencies where regular and consistent information is required, the ABC moves to "rolling coverage". During these broadcasts, presenters will interview spokespeople from emergency agencies, seek weather details from the local Bureaux of Meteorology, cross live to ABC reporters in the field, and talk with relevant local, state and federal government representatives. Official warnings are repeated at pre-arranged times which are identified throughout the broadcast, until the bushfire or other event is no longer a threat.

During rolling coverage, ABC Local Radio will regularly broadcast eye-witness information. Callers are clearly identified as eye-witnesses and the ABC doesn't present information provided by callers as verified fact. It is at the discretion of the program makers as to whether callers views are broadcast on-air.