



The

Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

EAS SENSE

Why Broadcasters Should Not Underrate EAS

[December 2012] Since the mandated upgrade to the CAP enabled boxes, the Emergency Alert System (EAS) has never had a greater ability to inform the public about dangers. But at the very same time, newer technology threatens to make broadcasters irrelevant.

Making sure the public continues turning to local broadcasters for information and instruction depends a lot on the value broadcasters put on their historic place in the community.

Look around. There are many different plans to alert the public in cases of emergencies.

In recent years, the EAS has been joined by Reverse 911, Warning Sirens (some dating from the old Conelrad days!), and Internet text warnings. Since last year, the FEMA has also staked out its claim to a commanding presence in disaster alerting with alerts sent to telephones via the CMAS (Commercial Mobile Alert System).

None of these other systems can replace broadcast EAS with its potential for reaching the most people and follow-up with information and clear messages over a wide area. In fact, it is broadcasters themselves who have the power to make EAS the most useful of the alerting systems – or to abdicate their position as the alerting centers for the community.

So, the real question is: Is it worth it to broadcasters to embrace EAS and use it, as opposed to considering it a burden worth as little time and effort as possible?

HELPING THE PUBLIC

In concept, each of the various agencies emergency plans are driven by the desire to prevent death or injury. But politics and kingdom-building by local agencies who do not want to answer to the Media can actually work to prevent clear calls to the listening public.

Trying to control the flow of information by using Reverse 911, for example, assumes people will answer phone calls from unknown phone numbers or listen to recorded messages from people they do not know. Many will not.

Internet texts and phone voicemail messages will only reach those who have their receivers on and can understand the message.

And then there is a recent CMAS alert in Washington State shows how, without the ability to clarify and update information, CMAS alerts easily can cause more panic than assistance.

A PROBLEMATIC MESSAGE

CMAS was set up through the FEMA IPAWS (Integrated Public Alert and Warning System) by the major Cellular carriers to broadcast emergency messages to cell phone subscribers.

One of the first uses of this system in Washington State came on December 16th and 17th when the National Weather Service (NWS) used the system to warn of a blizzard for the Cascades and Olympics area, west of Seattle.

It is instructive to see how the messages looked on a cell phone:



Courtesy: Clay Freinwald

CMAS delivered warnings to cell phones as far as 100+ miles from the affected area

The message was delivered to every cell phone capable of receiving a CMAS warning in the counties where the NWS Blizzard Warning was issued, beginning at 2:05 PM on December 16th.

Although the blizzard was predicted for the Cascades and Olympics areas, the messages were received on cell phones in counties as far south as Portland, OR.

This cellular messaging, according to people in the CMAS structure, went exactly as planned.

On the other hand, more than a few problems immediately became evident with the Feds geo-targeting efforts.

EXACTLY WHERE IS THE DANGER?

As you can see, the message was rather general. Primarily, this is because the CMAS specifications have a 90-character limit to the characters in a CMAS message – a lower limit even than Twitter. The goal is to tell people to seek information, usually from broadcasters.

This presents some fairly obvious problems.

Problem #1: Many states in the West have rather large counties, where the terrain might well in-

clude everything from tall mountain ranges to coastal and other flat areas.

Problem #2: In this particular alert, the originating county contains over 2100 square miles, and includes a 37-square-mile island in the sound. Plus, FEMA protocols ended up alerting people as far as one hundred or more miles away from the potential blizzard areas.

Problem #3: The federal “one size fits all” mentality confused many people seeing the warning on their cell phone, and who had no idea why they were being told to take actions based on a blizzard. You might call it Geo-Vagueness.

Problem #4: The direction to “Check Media.” While the CMAS message originated in the same place as weather-related EAS messages – NWS – the way they are worded, handled and distributed is quite different.

And Problem #5: With no coordination, where will the thousands of people turn for such information? “Media?” What media? Where? Do the broadcasters know that cell phone users will be tuning in for information? Does anyone see a problem?

IT IS NOT WORKING

In summary, not only did the message fail to indicate where the problem was nor what media to check, it alarmed a great many people – and put broadcasters on the spot. Local stations report the mention of “Media” caused many individuals to assume all this was connected to the EAS and had come from that system.

However, broadcasters had nothing to do with the message nor any control over it. And while listeners sought information, most stations were still playing the automated hits or TV reruns.



Nevertheless, many people did assume the message was originated by the broadcasters' EAS, were unhappy about receiving this sort of non-informative message – and said so.

And this was not the first time CMAS messages had recipients wondering what the government was really doing. Incidents like this – and a rather curious CMAS message received by some *the day after* Hurricane Sandy flooded New York and New Jersey and telling them to “evacuate” – graphically show some of the current limitations of CMAS.

NOT READY FOR PRIME TIME

Although theoretically, cell phone notifications can be limited to specific cell sites, as noted, the CMAS uses geo-targeting by county. Hence, the message was sent to a great many people who really had no need to worry about a blizzard.

The common perception in the low-lying and outlying areas was that the authorities did not know what they were doing. That and the panic caused to others by such alerts adds to the continuing reduction in the public's confidence in any of the alternate alerting systems, especially including EAS.

After queries were made to them, it was clear the designers of the CMAS did not contemplate a geographic level of less than one country. So, with all cell sites in a county running the same message, areas where the NWS expected danger got the same message as places where there was no blizzard danger, except perhaps at the local Dairy Queen.

DECONSTRUCTION

SECC and other EAS folks tried to understand and explain what had happened.

In discussions with the FEMA, it has now been emphasized that the sheer size the counties such as found in Washington State make providing detailed, targeted information to the public a bit more of a challenge than they thought.

So there is some good news in all this. Some of the FEMA and CMAS staffers have listened to the SECC groups and they are starting to realize the potential for confusion and misdirection among the general public regarding emergency instructions. Overall, the CMAS community is starting to make changes.

The Washington State EAS folks also have helped the NWS understand the issues raised.

At the same time, CMAS does have one major advantage over EAS: People do not have to have their radio or TV on to get the messages. They come to their cell phones automatically.

And this, in turn, presents a challenge to all broadcasters. A challenge – and an opportunity.

KEEPING THE HIGH GROUND

With cell phone usage continuing to climb and even replacing landlines, it might not be long before the CMAS might be considered the most effective alerting tool in the public warning toolbox.

Broadcasters should take note.

It is not that there should be a “war” between the EAS and the CMAS. However, with the continuing trends toward more automation and less localism at many stations, especially in the consolidated clusters, the broadcast industry risks losing the public perception that when danger occurs, the first places they should check are broadcast outlets.

What can be expected of public perception if they get a CMAS alert and can find nothing on their radios aside from automated hits and satellite talk shows? It is almost as if the cell phone industry is getting ready to give the public a different source of news and information.

USE THE OPPORTUNITY

Instead, this is the time for broadcasters to make the effort to be sure they know their local emer-

gency agencies, managers, as well as the NWS folks.

Rather than running merely the required tests each week, broadcasters should use the current CMAS Geo-Vagueness as a way to show their product is superior for listeners and maintain the competitive advantage of being the news source for their community.

In many places, the Emergency Management folks are starting to pay attention. Failure on the

part of broadcasters to build the needed bridges and communicate with them now will have the opposite effect, making the EAS a lot less effective in the future – and diminishing the role of broadcasters in emergency alerting.

Stations that real want to serve their community should take note – and action – now.

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