The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
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EAS SENSE

Aligning NWS Products with Local Needs

By Adrienne Abbott

[August 2015] With the summer/fall tornado/ hurricane season heading to its climax for the year, many broadcasters and their communities are struggling to find the right mix of warnings and alerts that meets the needs of the public.

At risk might be the very existence of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) as we know it. Adrienne Abbott discusses some key issues.

For a half-century, broadcasters have been a major source of news, information, instructions, and reassurance during natural disasters and other local emergencies.

From Conelrad to the EBS to the EAS, listeners and viewers have long heard a distinct audio tone followed by the words "this is a test" – in some places far more often than actual emergencies. But for others the alerts – especially tornado alerts, for instance – have been life-savers.

EAS MISSION ENDANGERED

At the same time, the whole structure of the EAS is under pressure from several federal agencies, each with their own, often conflicting agendas, jeopardizing what has been in most cases a free warning network.

For example, in recent weeks the National Weather Service has been promoting their request for the FCC to approve adding several new EAS alert codes to their already lengthy menu of potentially dangerous weather warnings.

Among the proposed codes a new wind warning, desired because the criteria for the current High Wind Warning does not really address the finer points of hurricane conditions. The NWS apparently feels listeners need to know strong hurricane winds are different than winds generated from other meteorological mixtures.

The NWS thinks you might be more likely to take action if they issue an Extreme Wind Warning for 80 mph winds from a hurricane making landfall rather than using the existing High Wind Warning code because that code applies to a different kind of wind event. Unfortunately, you can only appreciate the distinction when you learn the difference between the kind of winds in the High Wind Warning and the kind of winds generated by a hurricane is so

great that up to now NWS has preferred to use the event code for a tornado to issue warnings for these conditions.

UNNECESSARY CONFUSION

The mental gymnastics it takes for some of us in the broadcast community to wrap our minds around this logic are similar only to the performance of a contortionist on this season's lineup for *America's Got Talent.* Unfortunately, the public may well have even more difficulty parsing or appreciating the somewhat subtle distinctions among the event codes.

Even more troubling is the fact that the minds who came up with this weedy proposal plan to apply the Extreme Wind Warning code to a limited specific area but issue it on Broadcast stations where it will be heard for hundreds miles away from the affected area by people who will never experience anything stronger than a mild afternoon zephyr.

At least the other new event codes, such as the ones which relate to a Hurricane Storm Surge Watch (SSA)_and Warning (SSW), are not as arcane as the Extreme Wind Warning (EWW),

The reaction from broadcasters in Nevada to these proposals has been a bit underwhelming; something like "Oh, goody, more codes NWS can use to torture us."

What is wrong with this picture you ask? Note, Nevada! Not Mississippi or NOLA. Nevada, where we have been hit with dozens of weather warnings already this summer. Nevada, where we are in the fourth year of drought. Nevada, where people do not die from the 0.14 inch of rain we get from a spectacular rain storm. Nevada, where we get more “message flooding” than flooding from real rain.

The upshot is that we need to bring a variety of groups together and fix the problems, before stations and the public alike become completely desensitized to the duck farts that introduce an EAS alert.

AGENCY CONFLICTS

EAS is not just about weather. But, as with much of what happens in government, the EAS suffers from a variety of agencies each seeking implementation of their differing goals.

In the old days, the local Emergency Managers who wanted to issue a public warning would directly contact specific local stations which would then fire off an emergency alert. Other stations would receive the alert and rebroadcast it to their audience.

Today, to get an alert to broadcasters, the emergency official often has to filter through agencies local and national, with the final message distribution running through the FEMA Aggregator and back to the local area via IPAWS CAP. On the way, the message can branch out to cell phones, email, highway signs and that Brave New World known as Social Media – and even onward to systems as basic as community sirens still used in small towns.

Furthermore, the protocols of what is an acceptable alert and who can authorize it now consume forests of paper and result in delays in the "immediate warning" process. It is not enough now that you get the messages in your radio. People are now talking about the experience of being awakened at 3AM due to some alert from another state blaring out of the cell phone on their night stand.

Just as radio stations are opting out of most EAS alerts, many of the public now turn off the WEA function on their cell phones, disabling what might be the most important public warning tool to come along since the radio.

THE BEST PATH?

It is clear we need alerts. When the EAS operates, lives have been saved and children found.

On the other hand, when as many as eleven alerts are issued in less than an hour, as we had in northern Nevada last month, those of the pub-

lic that are not confused are annoyed. As a consequence, a number of industry groups have taken up the discussion of how to moderate “message flooding” and addressing the necessary priorities of the best way to get critical information to the public.

When I have suggested that broadcast might not be the best venue for NWS weather warnings, the response was something akin to having to wear the scarlet letter "A" – surrounded by a scarlet "E" and "S" of course.

Yet, as this year’s El Niño heats up, the monsoon and the computer models in the local Nevada WFOs generate EAS activations using the same algorithms NWS employs in Joplin, MO and Norman, OK. The result is that our station managers are re-programming their equipment faster than a dry lightning strike can start a fire in the dry duff of a field of cheat grass.

This is not the good result the public deserves.

THE CURRENT SETUP IS LACKING

While we debate the philosophical arguments of EAS as a valid weather warning component, Western broadcasters, live or automated, are resolving the issue for us by actively tuning out the National Weather Service.

Station managers say on a stormy afternoon they cannot compete with local EAS-free products like Pandora and Spotify or Sirius.

In fact, any benefit from the hundreds of weather warnings issued so far this summer has been obscured by the fact that in bad weather people stopped listening to that dual tone signal years ago. Severe weather here in the Wild West is what Richard Rudman calls a "self-announcing event."

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

There is no doubt most all NWS folks are truly concerned about the welfare of the public in their area.

Nevertheless, there is a real potential legal conflict bubbling under the surface of the government's good intent to save lives with the more targeted warnings.

Nevada and other states now have very strict laws against driving under the influence of a cell phone. You cannot even hold that puppy while you are driving! The law is selling a lot of Bluetooth technology but let me tell how well that works.

Imagine, if you will, a stormy afternoon complete with thunder, lightning, wind, and rain – buckets of rain. It is commute time and as you head home your wipers are slapping across the windshield providing a view about as clear as a fish tank with a clogged filter.

Then your radio goes silent for a split second, as if you are getting an incoming call. You start to form your thoughts to say "Hello can I call you back?"

But instead, the phone starts shrieking with WEA's version of the EAS tones magnified by Bluetooth to the point where you can feel the rear view mirror shake.

The worst part is that you cannot make it stop.

A HELPLESS FEELING

As much as you want to throw the phone out the car window you do not want to touch the thing because that is $250 bucks and two points if there is a cop around.

So for the two longest minutes of your life you are trying to concentrate on keeping the car upright and on the road in spite of the weather and having to watch for other cars, detour signs, rocks and debris through the jet wash of a Peterbilt in the fast lane, while Perfect Paul drones on at full volume about not standing under trees during thunderstorms.

Really? *Where* was that storm? You cannot stop because you are on a freeway, you cannot pull over, and you cannot – you just do not dare – pick up the phone and make it stop, even if there was a way to make it stop. It is any wonder so many people demand their cell phone companyies turn off such warning capabilities?

Oh, and yes, now tell me again why this sort of distraction is so important?

WE NEED ACTION, NOT TALK

What we do *not* need are new event codes to better distinguish between 70 and 80 mph winds. We *know* it is windy. What we *do* need is an understanding on the part of NOAA that the Western High Desert is not the Midwest.

There needs to be a new set of Fermat numbers, 3-D Doppler images and fractals, eyes of newts and toes of frogs and whatever other science goes into forecasting for places like Nevada and California instead of the same calculus used in Tornado Alley forecasts.

Thunderstorms and tornadoes do not kill people here in the West. There may be a theoretical element of a threat to life, limb or property in severe weather but, historically, people here do not die in these storms. Out here, these warnings do not meet the first criteria for an EAS activation

EAS NEEDS OUR ATTENTION

We know EAS, used properly, works. AMBER Alerts alone are proof of that.

When used properly, people can and do listen and pay attention to warning messages.

There has got to be some way that we can leverage the qualities that make AMBER Alerts work – strict guidelines appropriate to the area, a quick review process as used in some states, public education, and a real public-private partnership – do the same for weather warnings.

I am now trading in my soapbox for a glass of wine.

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