The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
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Focus on Regulation

The State of The EAS - 2019



By Richard Rudman

[August 2019] A number of emergencies in the past year or two have highlighted the state of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and its effectiveness in warning the general public.

Richard Rudman takes the long view of where things are in terms of public warning, and what is still needed to be done.

In 2014, I posed this question:

How did we get to this place, in the evolution of EAS (since it was launched in January of 1997), where the means that EAS Participants use to comply with Part 11 do not all work the same way, there is still confusion about how they deal with the EAS core last-ditch national warning missions, and our key partners in warnings – the Emergency Management (EM) community – still have not fully recognized and partnered with us as a last-ditch way to warn?

We all know about the issues caused by FCC placing mandates on broadcasters while asking the EM community to "cooperate." Getting all the stakeholders to communicate, much less cooperate, has not been easy.

PPW

A key goal for the Partnership for Public Warning's (PPW) with the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) almost 20 years ago was the capability to use all available means to warn a public at risk.

This was written, repeatedly, in our reports to the FEMA, the FCC, and the National Weather Service was to give the Emergency Management community.

However, especially since 2014, we have seen a troubling trend in the EM community to rely on those bright, shiny objects we refer to as "social media" and tend to look on the EAS as an afterthought – or even actually forget about the EAS completely.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of this trend is when the EM community ignores the clear and ever-present reality of the nature of major emergencies – that they can and will take down cell service, the Internet, and the public utility power grid that the general public relies on to stay connected.

IPAWS

The FEMA came up with an acronym for what the spectrum of warning capabilities should be called, IPAWS (Integrated Public Alert and Warning System).

I submit as of 2019 that this is still a wonderful descriptive for something that simply does not exist yet.

The emergence of third-party warning systems that alert and warn through social media brings with it another caution. There is, to date, no government mandate that such third-party warning tools have the features, safeguards, or comprehensive training programs that let them "play nice" with, not only the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), but also with what we broadcasters refer to as Legacy EAS.

IS ANYONE REALLY IN CHARGE?

CAP EAS has fostered businesses that offer turnkey warning implementation and delivery services.

Without saying if I think this is right or wrong, I just want to pose this question: Should such businesses be subject to the FCC's oversight and regulation?

I know that such regulation would raise some hackles, but if the old EBS and SAME protocols taught us anything, it is that proprietary warning solutions do not work well with other proprietary warning solutions.

Nor do such systems all lend themselves to user-friendly data entry systems that must be in place to help the warning center personnel who originnate Emergency Public Information (EPI) do their jobs better, avoid training issues, and contribute to the overall improvement of the warning spectrum.

THE MISSING REWRITE

The FCC is long-overdue to further clarifying Part 11 so vendors would be able to interpret the technical specifications for hardware and software exactly the same way.

This may mean adding clearer statements that, as far as basic handling of the EAN and possibly other core EAS codes is concerned, all originators must do their jobs the exact same way. Putting this in writing may be the easy part. Making it happen most certainly will not be an easy, painless, free, nor an overnight process.

The vendor community is likely best qualified to bring such changes to the FCC, as they have done so in the past. Will they do so now? And, if they do, will the FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau act?

SHIFT IN PLAYERS

True in 2014, and still true, the day when broadcast engineers were the key players who managed and cared about broadcast public warnings must end.



We must bind local and state EAS committees tightly to local and state emergency management, and bring in the management for all content whose streams are interrupted for emergency messaging, not just providers for on-air, cable or satellite.

Emergency management agencies who do not view the vast number of EAS Participants as part of their warning resource are leaving themselves open to criticism in after-action reports, when wildfires, earthquakes, floods, civil unrest, and other incidents call for warning as many people at risk as fast as possible, yet end up failing as power, telephone, and Internet services fail.

FIRST RESPONSE

Until the entire emergency management community realizes that warnings are a core response resource to be managed at the start of emergencies just like first responders, fire trucks, and emergency supplies, all the broadcast engineers in the world cannot fix what is wrong.

As I also said in 2014, we still need a successor to the public-private, non-profit effort that was the Partnership for Public Warning, Inc. Various Federal Advisory Groups (FACA's) like CSRIC are of course needed, but have rules and restrictions that PPW did not have and that a successor group must avoid.

Today, I see little chance, short of a major warning disaster, for this to happen nationally. I do think that such groups could – and should – be built at state and even local levels.

EM BUY-IN CRITICAL

Without government emergency management issuing timely messages geared to timely protective actions to protect lives and property, all parts of the media web that touches the lives of a public at risk are at a greater risk.

Similarly, without the entire EM community, from the Federal level down to local and regional level partnering with all strands of the non-social media web – including radio and TV broadcasting, and cable and satellite – the emergency management community does not have a truly integrated public alert and warning system.

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