

The Politics of Wildfires: The Media Perspective

L.R. Hatcher

Abstract

Leigh Hatcher is a prominent news reporter and presenter with extensive experience covering major bushfire events, both on the front line and in the studio as a news 'anchor' with Australia's 24 hour Pay TV News Channel, Sky News Australia.

His presentation on the top of The Politics of Wildfires - a media perspective, will be in three parts...

Where we have come from.

Where we are now.

Where we are heading.

It will deal with the dramatic changes that have taken place in the way the media covers major fires, not only on the fire field, but also in the communication of a fire emergency to the public, and the political implications of media coverage. Leigh will look at the role of the media and fire-fighters on the ground, the media and fire control leadership, the media and politics, the impact of 'good' coverage, and 'bad' coverage, and the media's role in the community.

Introduction

Just six short years ago I was asked to do a presentation to a conference of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

I entitled it – 'Look out they're coming'. The basic thrust of my presentation was, more than any thing else, a warning of what seemed to me an impending and imposing 'avalanche' of change in the way media operates and its use of technology. The presentation was seeking to address some of the media issues that emerged during Sydney's devastating fires of 1994, and how those issues and particularly the media itself would develop when the next 'big one' hit.

At the time I myself had just hooked onto this great new thing called e-mail. Where would we be without it now! What a rate of change we've all seen since then.

Here are a couple of lines from that presentation – in 1997.

'Understand this – next time, the media will be everywhere. Know this – when something big happens, the media will be there faster than it ever has before in much greater numbers, bristling with technology with an insatiable appetite for information and reaction – even when nothing's happening!'

It's all well and good to be so prophetic, but quite honestly I could not have imagined the breathtaking rate and breadth of change in how the industry where I've worked for 3 decades has changed, even in those 6 short years. A decade ago, I was in Monte Carlo when Sydney was announced as the winner of the rights to hold the Year 2000 Olympic Games. The

amount of gear we required to simply edit our material filled a station wagon, all the seats and the back – jammed in tight.

Today, the gear required to do the same job is contained in a small brief-case.

When I was the European Correspondent for the Seven Television Network, I remember reporting one particular story out of Portugal and to ensure that our feed was sent to London to be satellited back to Australia, a little old man had to hop on his donkey, ride up a mountain and flick one critical switch. In this year's coverage of the war in Iraq, we were able to see live pictures coming from tanks as they first crossed the border into Iraq, and then as they rolled into first Baghdad's international airport, and then the centre of Baghdad itself. No little old men, no donkeys. It's now live AND continuous. Look out they're here!

And when it comes to the coverage of Wildfires – the rate of change – and its consequences have been equally breathtaking, in particular at the kind of place where I work, Australia's 24-hour Pay-TV news Channel, Sky News Australia..

After prophesying six years ago that much of the change in the way the media operates will be accelerated by Pay-TV, I'm very pleased to say that's exactly where I find myself these days. It has totally revolutionised, and continues to revolutionise the way news is gathered, reported and consumed. The rate of change is so swift and issuing in such radically new mind-sets and news-gathering techniques that I would fear being out of it for a time and being totally left behind.

I'll give you just one brief 'wildfire-related' insight. Just on 12 months ago, you'll know well of the 'big one' that hit much of New South Wales and Victoria. My roster at Sky News Australia had me starting my shift at 12 midday, and from there we read a half hour of TV news on the hour, every hour, till six pm. It is another world away from conventional TV news services, especially with the shear volume of reading you have to cover in any one shift. On this particular day, in the middle of the midday bulletin there was a particularly serious and sudden outbreak in the north of Sydney and we did what we frequently do, we just remained on air, live and continuous. To cut a very long story short we just stayed on and on and on and I finally emerged from the studio for the first time at six pm, six hours later. Only one hour of those six hours was scripted. The rest was walking a razor thin line between triumph and tragedy. I can't tell you the number of times the producer in charge of the bulletin would whisper quietly yet alarmingly in my ear – 'I'm sorry I have nothing more for you' – no more packages, no more interviews and it was up to me and my fast fading brain to find things to say to keep our live coverage continuous. It is fabulously exhilarating.

But this brave new world of modern media serves a mightily important role in providing a frequently alarmed community with the very latest and hopefully the most accurate information on very a significant breaking story in the life of the city and the state.

And the way all this has developed and continues to unfold at this remarkable pace has very significant implications for 'The Politics of Wildfires'. I also issued this warning in my presentation six years ago, to the people who were widely and deservedly held up as heroes after the 1994 fires. I quote – 'You can be hailed as heroes and crucified – sometimes in the same hour!'

'The Politics of Wildfire's - now one would interpret this rather wide-ranging title in a number of ways.

Are they the politics of a local brigade? The politics of the local brigade, interfacing with their superiors in a regional centre or at Headquarters?

Are they the politics of the men (and occasionally the women) at HQ with all their braid and badges, seeking to preserve their braid and badges and advance their way through the organisation over the career corpses of some of their colleagues?

Are they those rich and interesting politics between other agencies and fire fighting agencies? Or, perhaps most significantly, should they primarily deal with the politics of how the fire fighting agency relates to its government or principle funding body – and my what a rich and varied tapestry of politics can be woven there!

How can you cover all those politics? Well I will try because no matter what level you are in the fire fighting process – from grunt to guru – there are politics. And ultimately, notwithstanding the very great deficiencies and frustrations and inadequacies of the formal political process, we still have to hope and expect, even demand that at its best, the highest calling of governmental or parliamentary politics is to serve the public good.

So from the media's perspective, and like it or not we're up to our necks in this process, I want to lay out a series of over-arching principles and observations on 'The Politics of Wildfires' that I hope will be a help and an inspiration and incentive to perhaps survive, and certainly to press on in your critically important job.

This is all a very important issue, because, are you not at the end of the day 'public servants' in the true meaning of the word, dependent on public money and especially public (and political) good will.

Well first – let's deal and dispense quickly with what I'll call 'organisational politics', first in the local brigade. We must surely ensure that it's stamped out never to spark to any kind of life.

One of the great joys of being an Australian as I've covered many of the 'big ones' in the last decade, is the experience of brushing up against the classic Australian volunteer bushfire brigade. To me, they are at the very heart of much of what makes up the Australian character. It's precious – it's worth bottling. If, during my time as the Seven Network's Olympic Reporter, anyone from a visiting international news crew would ask me where they could go to capture the essence of what makes an Australian – what they really are like – I would unhesitatingly send them to a New South Wales Rural Fire Service brigade – anywhere. So how crazy would you be to throw that away by petty brigade politics.

And you have to say, likewise, further up the line. I can only speak of my experience and observations here in New South Wales. It is inescapable for any organisation to have its own politics. But is it too naive and is it engaging in too much wishful thinking to imagine that those internal organisational politics can be kept to a minimum.

Why? Quite simply because of the poisonous and more importantly ruinous results of it. Surely it's not too naïve and not engaging in too much wishful thinking to imagine that the sense of 'service' which lays at the heart of your organisations could extend to the way you treat yourselves. I have seen many organisations, and sometimes observed them from the inside where those sort of 'politics' have contained the seeds of the organisation's destruction.

Having dealt with essentially internal 'organisational politics', I want to second deal with the governmental or parliamentary politics which can be the lifeblood or the death-knell for the vast majority of your organisations. And this is where there's a highly significant interface with what I know best – the media.

I thought it important at the top of my presentation to go into some detail and give a few quick examples of the rate of change, and the remarkable growth of 'the media gorilla' to argue the case that, right or wrong, like it or not, the media and its view of any endeavour or organisation will either sink you, or send you soaring.

I don't think it's good for any institution to have that sort of over-arching power and clout, any Gorilla should be contained and restrained. But in the real world, with the remarkable exponential growth of the media and its influence, it has taken on a power and influence that in effect leaves it virtually beyond effective challenge.

Contemplate the number of times you've seen political leaders around the world effectively stand up to the media and its view of the world or a particular issue or person and put it back in its box.

I have observed politics up close and personal for many of my 30 years in the media, including two spells in the parliamentary press gallery in Canberra. In the real world of politics more and more, the measure of a politician, especially a leader, is the kind of media he or she gets. We may not like that. Certainly the politicians and leaders often don't like it. I don't think that media coverage is in any way the effective and appropriate model for political leadership. It is not the best way for a country to be run, where the quickest and sharpest quote or best looking head gets the run and that particular politician rises to prominence – regardless of whether there's any substance behind the quick and sharp quote, regardless of the substance behind the politician themselves. It is not the best way for a country to be run, where its political leaders are constantly following, instead of leading - following the agenda, the attitude, or the hang ups of a particular media commentator or outlet. But more and more – that's the media world in which we live. I think many yearn for the day when we will see in politics a return to real leadership, where our political leaders lead – and not follow.

So where does the rubber hit the road – in ‘The Politics of Wildfires’? And I take it that the main force of that title, ‘The Politics of Wildfires’, deals primarily with the often uneasy and delicate relationship between those who are in charge of running often very large and highly specialised organisations fighting Wildfires – and their political masters, those with their eyes forever on the favour of the voters and the media.

Does this interface with media and politics matter to you? Why not press on regardless? Why not rise above the often prevailing lowest common denominator view of politics and the media? Well often in my observation, it does matter, because it might end up quite simply determining whether you want to hang onto your job or not. It might end up determining whether your organisation continues to be funded and equipped well, as it needs to be. It might, in the arena in which you operate, actually put peoples’ lives at risk. Assuming it matters – and it does for the best operators, what do you do.

First - don’t live in denial – this does actually matter, and you will deny it to your peril and the detriment of your organisation. You might not agree with the power and breadth of the media, it’s not the best way for the world to be run, but as one of Sydney’s main T.V. newsreaders used to say at the end of each night’s bulletin ‘That’s the way it is’.

Second – do the job well. Notwithstanding the distortions, mischief, and flawed intentions of the media, we have to believe that at the end of the day, there is no substitute for quality, efficient and comprehensive work, no matter what sphere of endeavour we’re talking about. Now that won’t always be the case, but in the long haul, and that’s what we should all be on about, not the fly-by-night headline of the day, quality and competency has to count and hopefully win out.

Quality and competency out in the field, and in wildfire control centres.

I’ll take as a case study in all of this, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service. It is the fire service with which I’ve had most direct contact.

It is a service that over the last decade, since those devastating fires in the early 90’s that has grown and flourished in its success out in the field, and in its management of both the media and ‘the politics of wildfires’. What’s it got going for itself?

To begin with, un-ambiguous and widely respected leadership. Commissioner Phil Koperberg is not just a figure-head, not a blow-in, not just a ‘talking head’. For decades, he has had extensive experience and a passionate commitment right from firefighting from the grass roots, up through the ranks, to the job heading up this large volunteer and professional force. When he speaks, and more importantly, when he acts, he knows what he’s talking about.

He speaks with clarity, and unadorned frankness. Notwithstanding the media's overwhelming move to style over substance – this man has demonstrated powerfully that substance still matters. And even in the midst of the worst of crises, in the heat of the worst battles, Phil Koperberg remains available for the media, unflappable and engaged therefore with the public (and his political masters).

And with that kind of leadership, doing the job, and dealing well with the media, success has bred success for the Rural Fire Service. Facing down some of the worst fires this nation has known over the last decade, this organisation and its volunteer force have been frequently hailed as heroes by a grateful public (and their political masters). Put yourself in the politicians place, who would want to interfere and bumble in, when things are going well?

That's not to say there've been the challenges and indeed the detractors who voice their opposition to some of what this organisation does and its policies and practices. But so far, success has continued to breed success. Always, the voice of the Rural Fire Service is heard, because it remains again - 'available for the media, unflappable and engaged therefore with the public (and its political masters)'.

How does it view the media? The most important thing to say here is it views the media as a legitimate player in the public process. It is not regarded as 'the enemy'. It may often, and indeed does often play the enemy, the devil's advocate, but the clear and consistent policy of this organisation seems to be to remain engaged and available. That's a tough thing to do sometimes, when the media is baying for your blood, when its creating mischief and mayhem. It is one of the greatest challenges for an organisation, to hold its head and remain calm, engaged and gracious while the gorilla of the media is trying to jump all over you. But if you can hold it together in the face of the firestorms out in the field with which you're familiar, you must also be able to hold it together under the searing and searching firestorm of media controversy.

And one of the most critical ways in which the RFS manages the media is to treat its practitioners not only as not the enemy, but with respect. No matter what some might say about the reptiles of the media, we're still only human. It really does matter how you treat those individual practitioners of this craft. If you're hostile, obstructive, even deceptive who'd be surprised if the gorilla jumps all over you. If you're respectful, helpful honest, available and play it straight, who'd be surprised if the gorilla is significantly tamed, engaged for public good.

Finally, the New South Wales Rural Fire service affords its media representatives an appropriate status and seniority within its organisation. Many organisations and institutions I've observed up close adopt a rather twisted logic that goes like this... 'We hate the media, we regard them as the enemy. We've got to deal with them, so we'll put a media liaison person on the staff. But we won't really trust them, we never know what they might let slip to their media mates. So we'll keep them right out of the inner circle, in fact the more they're treated like mushrooms and kept in the dark and fed on .. nothing much... the better.'

My observation of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service is exactly the opposite of that approach. Its media representatives are given their rightful position of authority and access to the entire range of operations, from the very top of the organisation, down to the grass roots volunteer brigades. They are not treated as the enemy of their organisation, (this a very easy trap for organisations to fall into). They are trusted to speak to the media and therefore the media trusts and appreciates them. They respect media practitioners and the media respects them. The success of that media approach has bred success, even though as a high profile organisation it will inevitably face its controversies and crises as it has.

To conclude – the way the media is handled is a vitally important issue for any major organisation. The media will never go away. The gorilla will, it seems to me, only ever grow in its size and reach. We may not like it, it may not be entirely good for the world, but there's no denying it, and those who'll wait for it to just 'go away' will waste their lives waiting.

The answer is to engage. Shun the temptation to treat the media as 'the enemy', that's quite simply a self fulfilling prophecy. Embrace the technology to allow the media to do its best around you. That will be costly but well worth the expense. Remember that those in the media are still only human, and will respond well to open, honest even gracious engagement.

Afford your own media managers real clout and authority. They just have to be part of the inner circle and trusted and in particular not treated as 'the enemy' themselves.

There are never any guarantees when it comes to the media and that's entirely appropriate. There'll always be a tension between what the media regards as its legitimate rights and role in this world, and organisations that just want to do their job. But when it comes to 'The politics of Wildfires', my strong view is that pro-active engagement with the Gorilla of the media will most of the time keep those in the zoo of politics off your back – so you can do your job – well.