

THE IMPORTANCE OF RADIO DURING EMERGENCY SITUATIONS:
2015 CENTRAL TEXAS FLOODS

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2015 CENTRAL TEXAS FLOODS

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by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the hard-working 2015-2016 staff of KTSW-FM 89.9. Without their passion, expertise and willingness to always learn, the station would not be where it is now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to KTSW-FM 89.9's fearless General Manager Dan Schumacher. Without your help and willingness to go above and beyond for your "kids," this work would not have happened and this year would not have been as successful.

Thank you to my team at KTSW, who worked for hours during each emergency situation and always supported me throughout this process.

A final thank you goes to the future executive team at KTSW. Your eagerness to continue our collaborations and commitment to aiding our community gives hope for the future of the station and our importance to the university and city.

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ABSTRACT

The two floods of Central Texas in 2015, on Memorial Day weekend and in late October, ravaged the city of San Marcos. This project includes the transcript of an audio documentary, focusing on Texas State University's student-run radio station, KTSW-FM 89.9's efforts to provide adequate emergency updates on-air during floods. At the end of the documentary is an outlined plan for the station's response to future emergency situations, which can also be applied to other student-run and professional operations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Radio has been around for over 100 years. It has always been used to communicate a message, whether it be news, information or entertainment. When it comes to emergencies, radio is the most trusted form of communication for updates and instructions.

During the Central Texas Memorial Day flood, Texas State University's student-operated radio station, KTSW-FM 89.9, responded to the need for emergency information. Staff members volunteered to ensure up-to-date information was on the air for San Marcos and Central Texas residents. None of these students had ever been in a similar situation and each person was caught off guard by the emergency weather. The KTSW team pulled together throughout the days and weeks after the flood, learning more about the process and formalizing the procedure for future emergency situations.

When another flood hit San Marcos just a few months later, KTSW was better prepared. The station executive directors and I developed teams for each part of the emergency coverage and worked on shifts with different volunteers. Because the process was so much smoother, the team was able to relay a greater amount of accurate information to listeners and followers.

Hays County Emergency Management Coordinator Ken Bell once said his media priorities during emergencies are: the official social media accounts for the city and county, then radio, TV and finally newspapers. During emergencies, the necessity for timely, accurate information is never more apparent. Radio, the second priority, offers that immediacy while being widely available to all audience members.

KTSW now has emergency procedures in place for future scenarios. By holding meetings, training sessions and developing teams to focus content, all university students can provide a great service to their respective communities during emergency situations. This audio documentary will address those steps and procedures, and the path that has led to this point.

II. AUDIO DOCUMENTARY

Music

Schumacher: “We can have severe weather and flooding; it just happens in a moment.”

Bell: “This is the worst they’ve ever seen in their life.”

Tice: “Other people are losing their homes. They’re losing family members.”

Huddleston: “That was the worst one that we had had.”

Raybuck: “The heart and soul of why we are here, first and foremost, is to make sure that more people are safe and fewer people end up in the kind of catastrophe that happened Memorial Day weekend of 2015.

Narration: The Central Texas 2015 Memorial Day flood took many by surprise, including the staff at K-T-S-W San Marcos, Texas State University’s student-run radio station. City and county officials did have some warning, however. Emergency Management Coordinator Ken Bell was on high alert as news rolled in from Wimberley.

Bell: “Well first thoughts were that we had at least four hours of head start notification, actually we had two or three days. They told us on Thursday that it was going to be bad... It wasn’t ‘til about ten or eleven o’clock at night that we were getting real hands-on-deck views of what was going on in Wimberley. From people that I’ve known for 30 years telling me this is the worst they’ve ever seen in their life... when I’m hearing the fire chief in Wimberley tell me, ‘This is the big one,’ and he’s never seen it that bad... that’s pretty telling.”

Bell said a flood like this had not been experienced in the area since 1929.

Bell: “That was the biggest in history and this was 14 feet bigger than that, so I mean take the worst in the history of anyone alive, and double that, and that’s what we were faced with on Memorial Day. It’s hard to wrap your mind around what was going on.”

The City of San Marcos Communications Department, consisting of Director Kristi Wyatt and Communications Specialist Trey Hatt, were in charge of pushing out all official information during the flood. Early that morning, they were called to the Emergency Operations Center by Bell.

Wyatt: “Mid-evening, we sort of heard some rumblings in Wimberley that something was happening and this wasn’t just a regular rain event. So we started paying a lot of attention to the National Weather Service and some of our surrounding cities to see what information they were pushing out.”

Wyatt was sick, so the first call from Bell went to Hatt.

Hatt: “I threw on clothes and threw some things in a backpack and I was in the E-O-C.”

Once he was in the Emergency Operations Center, Hatt needed to figure out what exactly was going on.

Hatt: “And it sounds kind of silly, but it’s not when you have so much going on, it can be really easy if you’re not experienced or if you don’t stop and think to put out wrong information because you’re hearing a whole lot of things.”

Those working at K-T-S-W San Marcos were going through the same issues. Knowing what information to put out and how to prepare for the situation taking place had not been on their radar. Staff members, including directors, were put in charge with almost no training of what to do during emergency situations.

Reynolds: “I remember... being very alarmed.”

K-T-S-W's Production Director Jacob Reynolds had never seen a flood like this.

Growing up in the Houston area, he'd only experienced slight flooding during hurricanes.

Reynolds: "I remember hanging out at my house for a little bit and then coming up to the station with everyone and starting to create, like, P-S-As and that kind of stuff explaining what was happening, kind of like safety precautions, what to do, where to go, where not to go, stuff about shelters."

K-T-S-W General Manager and Faculty Advisor Dan Schumacher agreed that the situation wasn't ideal.

Schumacher: "We were all kind of back on our haunches really not fully prepared for what was a tremendous disaster and tragedy to transpire. That was the weird thing about it, or maybe the wild thing about it, is a better way to say it, we were not in the proper mindset even to respond to that."

As Station Manager, I texted all of the directors in the area to see who was available.

That included drive-time show producer, Sydney Huddleston. Huddleston grew up in San Marcos, but still wasn't ready for the degree of flooding taking place.

Huddleston: "I woke up, I checked Twitter, and I saw a lot of tweets about there being a flood. First, I checked outside my window because I live kind of by the river, and I didn't see any water so I was like, 'Eh! I'm unaffected.' But then I got a text from my boss... that's you... that said, 'Hey can you go to the station?'"

Huddleston made it to the station to join K-T-S-W's Program Director Erica Tice.

Tice: "It was really hectic. I remember that, and it was very stressful, too."

The station was so understaffed for the weekend that Huddleston, Tice and Reynolds were left to do everything.

Huddleston: “Erica and I spent like, I think total 12 hours on the air.”

Tice: “Basically I was on air. I was just on air telling people what was going on, giving them updates about road closures, if more rain was coming, what areas were being evacuated and stuff like that. I also helped make a P-S-A that played after we left the station.”

Huddleston: “You know there were so few people, we had to like constantly be doing work. Like few moments for breaks, so I did get exhausted I think and then a little grumpy and then I stopped thinking about the effect it had. But I know that there were... Erica got the call that someone was listening, that we were their only source of real information about the floods, since they didn’t have their T-V or anything.”

About 14 miles to the west, Wimberley Valley Radio, a community radio station, was in a different situation during the flood. The station was chartered under the Local Community Radio Act of 2010 to aid during emergencies, but didn’t yet have the right equipment, paperwork or personnel at the time. The station was awarded its full license from the Federal Communications Commission on February 25, 2016.

Founding member and current station manager Susan Raybuck worked for years to make sure that Wimberley could have a source for emergency updates. Now, that’s finally happening.

Raybuck: “We know that emergencies just come now and then, but you have to have the infrastructure and the plans in place to deal with those emergencies when they come. The heart and soul of why we are here, first and foremost, is to make sure that more people are safe and fewer people end up in the kind of catastrophe that happened Memorial Day weekend of 2015.”

Media inquiries came in slowly to the city of San Marcos because of the speed of the Memorial Day weekend flooding.

Wyatt: “It wasn’t until the next morning, maybe eight or nine o’clock that we got any media presence, and then it was a lot. A little bit later for radio. I do know that social media played a huge part, I know that’s not the focus of your story, but we did see radio stations tweeting things that we were tweeting and sharing on Facebook, and so there was a presence, but I think just the timing of it kind of pushed media back.”

The city’s own low power F-M radio station was flooded during the Memorial Day flood, making it inoperable. K-T-S-W is often the first radio outlet the city communicates with. The station has had an agreement with the city for years to help during emergency situations. Schumacher says because the station’s city of license is San Marcos, there’s a responsibility to uphold.

Schumacher: “We take that responsibility very seriously. My predecessor, Bob Schrader, from the time they put this radio station on the air, up until the time he handed it off to me, had worked with the community, community leaders, emergency management officials, S-M-P-D, and on campus, of course, U-P-D and other offices that basically deal with emergency-type situations, to make sure that we were here to assist them in any type of a crisis, a situation.”

K-T-S-W has been able to provide emergency updates for many years through its relationship with the city. Schumacher says that partnership hasn’t faltered.

Schumacher: “I think it’s been fairly consistent. It was expressed to me when I came in here and I was connected right away with the city authorities so I could keep that going.”

City officials also have the ability to break into K-T-S-W's airwaves, in case of an immediate emergency. With a phone call and special code, they can go immediately on the air and then call students to provide more continual updates. After the flood, the Central Texas area worked for months to rebuild and recoup what they had lost, only to see it swept away again in October by what is referred to as the "All-Saint's Flood." This time however, the flood was different.

Bell: "The difference is velocity versus volume. The All-Saint's flood was just like the '98 flood, the only difference was about five-feet more water.

K-T-S-W staff members were also much more prepared for the flood this time around. Social Media Administrator Jasmine Kardani says she was able to do more.

Kardani: "Well for the Memorial Day floods, I feel like people were very panicky because it wasn't... it had been such a long time since anything like that happened. So in any situation, I feel like anyone would panic over that, but then with the October floods I feel like it was a lot more, kind of like handled a little bit better because we had already gone through the experience and we had things set in play.

The station's executive directors developed teams for each part of the emergency coverage and worked in shifts with their volunteers. Because the process was so much smoother, a greater amount of information was relayed to listeners and followers. While this is not the end of the planning process for emergencies, the preliminary plans helped the staff during October.

Reynolds: "The Memorial Day flood was kind of like the first one that hit us in a while, to where we were kind of put in a situation of, 'Oh my gosh, we need to act on this.'

After that we created a plan, like an Emergency Plan, with people to contact, what they'll

be doing, where they're located, if they can get to the station easily or not, so I felt like the Halloween flood, we knew this was going to happen, so we had people on call and ready to go. We had a general idea of what to do, so I think it went a whole lot more smoothly."

The station's new plan also includes an updated Google map of where each team member lives in the community, making it easy to determine who can make it to the station when certain areas are flooded.

Huddleston: "Because of what we have now, we have people all around San Marcos on our teams. So if there's an area of San Marcos where they can't leave their houses and they can't get to Old Main, someone else... we can see who else can get to Old Main, and in a more timely fashion and stuff like that.

Everyone went about selecting their team members differently, but they needed to be properly trained and reliable.

Reynolds: "So, I picked my strong people who knew Adobe Audition well."

Tice: "I decided I should probably choose my D-Js with stronger speaking skills, the ones who enunciate really well and that I could depend on."

Huddleston says with the new plan in place, shifts and assigned tasks run a lot smoother.

Huddleston: "I think it's a really good idea because, well like I said, when I was just one of the only people here, I was doing social media, I was doing on-air, I was doing news stuff... and probably more than that."

Tice agrees the process was easier for staff members.

Tice: “It was a lot more organized and I feel like it was easier... it was less stressful simply because we had more people on the staff helping out and we had a plan laid out. So I didn’t feel lost or anything. I felt like I knew exactly what to do.”

With today’s world of constant media, Raybuck of Wimberley Valley Radio says inaccurate information can fly around at the drop of a hat.

Raybuck: “It’s our responsibility to have absolutely careful information and talk, communicate well with law enforcement and emergency responders and such.”

She also says that radio must rely on the information from emergency management teams, and that this is not the time for investigative journalism. Because of the importance of radio, K-T-S-W and other stations alike must continue to improve their emergency response plans and teams, especially with the high-turnover of student staffs, to be able to relay the appropriate information.

Schumacher: “Having a structure in place, having documents in place, having information in place that can easily be reviewed and passed on to the next person is really really important because it helps us to create consistency.”

Radio also has the ability to personalize stories. Whether it’s through having students live on the air for consistent updates or being out in the community, there is a connection with listeners. Wyatt says K-T-S-W can continually work on this for future updates.

Wyatt: “One of the things that I’ve noticed just in the culture of radio, and this may just be my own perception, but I feel like radio is less present. And it ties back to the whole culture of the story where you’re just reporting information, so, ‘I don’t need to show up, I just need you to tell me the facts.’ But I think that being a little more present would be

helpful. And then once the initial emergency is over, when everybody's safe, but the story is still very active and alive, personalizing the story is a little more."

Wimberley Valley Radio hopes to do the same thing.

Raybuck: "Well I think that it can tell the stories of individuals, and by hearing those stories, it can really... people can imagine what it would be like if they were in that person's shoes.

Taking time to tell all stories through radio will personalize radio even more so.

Hatt: "There's a lot of really great potential for radio storytelling and K-T-S-W demonstrates that, K-U-T in Austin does that, and it'd be awesome to see more of that.

Because of its accessibility, radio does not discriminate and is available to everyone, making it a universal medium. Everyone really agrees, when all other sources fail, radio remains.

Schumacher: "Radio serves a unique role in that, pretty much everybody can access the airwaves. You don't need electricity to do so. You can have batteries and a radio, which you know if the cell phone towers go down, that is out. If the electricity in your house goes out, you can't turn on your television. Radio could be the only way you have to receive information about whatever crisis, whatever situation is happening at that particular time."

Kardani: "You can always count on radio to be there, if everything else is out. If your T-V's out, if your computer's out, you can always find a radio somewhere and listen to it, and know what's going on and be current, in that moment."

Ken Bell: "Technology's a wonderful thing, but cell towers get full, internet goes down, when internet goes down, that's your voice over I-P telephones now, radio's the last gap-

filler that is out there. There is, and people don't realize it yet, but the more and more technology fails during emergencies, which we expect it to, that's why we've done everything we can to prepare for that eventuality. In fact, I'm talking to you on a flip-phone right now because guess what fails during emergencies? Those really cool Galaxy-this and Apple-that, it's all moot."

Tice: "To be honest, most millennials, they don't have cable T-V. So they don't really have access to news, aside from on their phone, like looking up online, but I mean, it takes a while to verify when a post was actually updated. When we're here, we're giving you the up-to-date information."

Tice says radio is always there for you. The next step is to make sure that the public knows that radio is there. Instead of making a radio a last line of communication, it needs to be a priority at all levels.

Bell: "Right now, my position is radio... it's the most reliable, resilient thing that we have. We don't use it to its best, to its maximum potential because we don't own it, so to speak."

K-T-S-W staff members agree. Radio also now communicates through a diversity of mediums, from on-air to online to social media and beyond.

Reynolds: "You know, you never really know what's going to happen until you're directly affected by it. I also think we can learn that there might not always be an easy way to get the information, but that radio's kind of one of those things that you can generally always rely on, that will be there. As long as you have a pair of Double-A batteries and a receiver."

Schumacher: “Younger people want to kind of write radio off. I think they always will need to remember that in times of need, radio is there. It sounds like such a cliché, I understand that. It sounds like something someone who’s trying to keep radio alive would say. I am to a certain extent.”

Radio has been around for over 100 years. It has always been used to communicate a message, whether it be news, information or entertainment. When it comes to emergencies, radio is one of the most trusted forms of communication for updates and instructions.

Music Out

The audio portion of this project can be found at:

<https://soundcloud.com/tara-pohlmeyer/the-importance-of-radio>

III. EMERGENCY PLAN

I. Teams

- a. Assigned by the executive directors and team leaders through each staff at the beginning of each semester.
 - i. Station Manager will email team leaders (listed below), who will then form their teams within one week of the start of each semester.
- b. Teams include:
 - i. News: Provides reports and photos from the field, feeds information to on-air staff, makes calls to professionals, produces wraps and soundbites and posts new content online as it's available, gathers information for newscasts. The team leader is usually the News Director.
 - ii. Social Media: Updates KTSW's social media, tracks hashtags, gathers info to be fact-checked by news team and posts updates and photos as they are available. The team leader is usually the Social Media Administrator.
 - iii. Remote Broadcasting: Utilizes the Barix remote broadcast system to provide live updates and interviews from the Emergency Management Center (preferred) or other remote location. The team leader is usually the Sports Director.

- iv. On-Air: Provides constant live updates on the air, takes calls to the studio, plays interviews from news and remote teams and keeps listeners informed and safe. The team leader is usually the Program Director.
- v. Audio Production: Produces public service announcements utilizing professional interviews with Emergency Management Coordinators, overviews all audio quality and ensures that produced elements play as scheduled and when needed. The team leader is usually the Production Director.
- vi. Web Content: Maintains an online presence and aggregates content from news and on-air teams to produce and edit stories for the blog, checks stories for accuracy and posts content in a timely manner. The team leader is usually the Web Content Manager.

II. Training

- a. Station Manager meets with the following officials at least once a year.
 - i. City of San Marcos Communications Director
 - ii. City of San Marcos Emergency Management Coordinator
 - iii. San Marcos Police Department Chief (optional)
 - iv. Texas State University Police Department Chief
 - v. Texas State University Emergency Management Coordinator
- b. Training meeting held twice a semester for KTSW's Emergency Response Team

- c. Mock-emergency drill situation held at least once a year through Texas State's Emergency Management Coordinator

III. During an Emergency

a. Making the call

- i. Wait for a "flash flood watch" from the National Weather Service
- ii. Station Manager then contacts all team leaders
 - 1. Team leaders should contact their team members, seeing who is available
 - 2. All regularly scheduled on-air personnel should be notified to provide additional weather updates - at least three per hour
 - 3. Social media remains active, following official news accounts
 - 4. Web content is posted on flood and storm safety
- iii. Watch the weather. If weather escalates, full team is called in.

b. When to end updates

- i. Once flash flood warnings have ended and there is no longer eminent danger for the community, updates can slow down to normal, as-scheduled DJ breaks.
- ii. Station Manager and team leaders should continue to monitor weather and stay in contact with city officials.

IV. After an Emergency

- a. News team should begin to produce stories of those affected by the emergency and the appropriate emergency officials, utilizing multimedia aspects
- b. Social media team should continue to monitor accounts and post flood recovery updates and volunteer opportunities
- c. Audio production team should produce multiple, lasting public service announcements to be scheduled at least once per hour
- d. Web content team should continue to produce, edit and post content online

IV. CLOSING REMARKS

This emergency response plan should be an ever-evolving and improving document for KTSW. Seeing the station grow in their knowledge and passion for emergency coverage has been extremely rewarding, and I hope that passion continues for the rest of KTSW's existence.

This topic comes at a time when the community of San Marcos is still rebuilding. It is extremely important that KTSW be there for the community that has given the station life, listenership and a reason to be more than an educational laboratory, but a resource.

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Huddleston, Sydney. KTSW-FM 89.9 Other Side Drive Executive Producer.

Kardanimoghaddam, Jasmine. KTSW-FM 89.9 Social Media Administrator, Social Media Team Leader.

Raybuck, Susan. Wimberley Valley Radio, Station Manager.

Reynolds, Jacob. KTSW-FM 89.9 Production Director, Production Team Leader.

Schumacher, Daniel. KTSW-FM 89.9 General Manager, Faculty Advisor.

Tice, Erica. KTSW-FM 89.9 Program Director, On-Air Team Leader.

Wyatt, Kristi. City of San Marcos Communications Director and Intergovernmental