

## Chapter 10

# The media and fire services

## Dealing with conflicting agendas<sup>1</sup>

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The discourse around fire is saturated with superlatives, with words such as ‘exceptional’, ‘unprecedented’, ‘extraordinary’ and so on. Such hyperbole may give some immediate comfort to those who have just suffered trauma and major losses. But in the long run, it only serves to reinforce ignorance and losses in the inevitable future event (Campbell 2003: 246).

### Chapter summary

This chapter seeks to understand the complex relationships between media news organisations and fire and land management agencies in the provision of bushfire warnings and information.

Using a combination of interviews (with journalists and agency staff) and observation (in CFA headquarters and a media unit) this research project identified that relationships between the media and fire-related organisations are now more complex and productive than earlier literature on this subject suggested.

We recommend that these productive relationships be strengthened by more regular monitoring of the media by fire agencies, by joint activities involving journalists and fire agencies, the development of a single media unit to represent all agencies during emergencies, and by developing within the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the land management agency, a specific, clearly branded and separate fire division.

### Introduction

The media are identified in the research literature and by Australian fire and land management agencies as high-priority sites where information and misinformation about bushfires is disseminated. Different media organisations have their own interests and agendas in reporting such events. These are often quite different from the interests and agendas of fire and land management agencies. Nor should agencies be regarded as all sharing the same interests, as each agency operates in a particular social, political and cultural context. Land management agencies in particular have complex responsibilities and relationships with the public. The complexity of these responsibilities and relationships can complicate the way that their activities are perceived by the public and reported in the media. This chapter, based on interviews with fire and land management agency staff and with journalists who have reported on fires, identifies the complex relationships fire and land management agencies have with the media and proposes strategies for acknowledging and addressing these different needs. It deals with journalists’ perceptions of fire and land management agencies and how those agencies are presented in the media. Although an examination of ‘perceptions’ might be seen as less than substantial, our view is that identifying