

**The Future of
Australian Disaster Information Network
(AusDIN)
and the Role Played by Library Networks**

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SUMMARY

The importance of knowledge and information in emergency management has been widely acknowledged at all levels within the sector. Recent events such as the Foot & Mouth outbreak in the U.K., the terrorist attacks in New York and Bali and the devastating bushfires in Australia have all served to highlight this in varying ways. AusDIN provides a mechanism through which knowledge and information sharing can be facilitated across many diverse groups. Additionally, advances in technology are offering opportunities for traditional methods in emergency management to be changed. AusDIN also presents the gateway through which these advancements can be integrated in to the emergency management environment in a coordinated and collaborative way.

INTRODUCTION

As we have just seen in the video clip, life in the 21st century can change suddenly and dramatically. A day may end completely differently than it began. Disasters are also no longer the isolated events that they once were. The management of these emergencies has had to adapt and change. The one constant in emergency management these days is change.

Many people look upon the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001 as a watershed event that changed the world and there is no doubt, in many ways it certainly did. As far as Emergency Management goes, it was but one very significant event in a long history of both natural and man-made disasters that have had significant and far reaching effects through out the world.

In many respects, the tragic events of 9/11 did go some way to removing some of the mystique surrounding what is Emergency Management and made it less of a black-art and more of a main-stream activity. It brought many Emergency Management activities under the glare of the public spotlight with a corresponding raising of awareness within the community. There are also other drivers that are impacting upon Emergency Management that in effect are changing the way we do our business.

The Terrorist events of September 2001, Bali in 2002 and other numerous examples around the world have led to the acknowledgement that Terrorism knows no boundaries. Accordingly, Counter-Terrorism activities have grown in importance and stature.

There is a much greater emphasis on Community Awareness activities. For those of you who are familiar with the recent Canberra bushfires, you may be aware that there has been an outcry that people in the community did not have enough information on what to do in the face of an impending bushfire.

There is a realisation that in respect of modern emergency management, there needs to be a whole of government approach as no level of government acts in isolation in respect to EM issues. This whole of government approach is not just about crossing State and Territory boundaries with the Commonwealth assuming an overarching role. Local Government plays a critically important role in relation to Emergency Management.

Advances in technology are impacting upon all facets of our life, Emergency Management is no exception. The processing power of every-day desk top computers allows more and more data to be readily processed, analysed and promulgated to where such information is needed, quickly and efficiently - this could not have been imagined 20 years ago! As information professionals, you would know that the World Wide Web is an information source with huge potential for application within the Emergency Management sector.

Access to relevant information and knowledge are common underlying threads that allow Emergency Managers to deal most effectively within their areas of interest. The changes occurring in the Emergency Management sector are occurring through the creation of the right environments for innovation, by investing in new ideas and by building industry/research linkages. These are all pivotally based on the concept of sharing knowledge and information.

The Emergency Management sector is an extremely large and diverse grouping of a number of disparate organisations, many of whose focus is not primarily Emergency Management. The challenge for the sector is how do we go about facilitating the sharing of information and knowledge amongst our partners, whoever and where ever they may be? Bear in mind that a very common concern raised is “How do I know what I don’t know? Part of the answer is AusDIN – Australian Disaster Information Network.

The concept of AusDIN has been around for a few years now. ~~morning~~ I’d like to briefly give an overview of the history of AusDIN and explain the concepts behind it and the directions it will be heading.

HISTORY

In the late 90’s, there was growing concern amongst the international Emergency Management community regarding the exchange of information that was occurring or more importantly, was not occurring in the sector. Information was not being collected in a standardised way. Information that was being collected was being used by the collecting agencies but other agencies who might also want to use that information usually didn’t know it existed or possibly there was duplication in efforts to collect it themselves.

In the “Response” sector, the value of fast access to accurate information was always more readily apparent. However, the information needs of the other sectors were equally important.

The understanding of the importance of knowledge and information sharing continued to gain impetus. A workshop in Geneva suggested that members of the international Emergency Management community should get together to progress this concept. Through a subsequent meeting in Washington in 1998, it was decided to create the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN). The vision of the GDIN is “The right information, in the right format, to the right people, at the right time”.

Through GDIN, there was a move for each global region to develop its own Information Network and in our region; this was to be the Asia Pacific Disaster Information Network or APDIN. Through this same vision, it was expected that underneath each regional network, there would be individual National Disaster Information Networks.

Closer to home, experiences in the Australian context demonstrated the same lessons that were being learnt overseas. A number of organisations gathered at Emergency Management Australia, Mount Macedon in November 2000, to hold a workshop that had been suggested by the Disaster Information Management Steering Group.

The aim of the workshop was to facilitate a nation-wide approach to meet the disaster information needs of the Australian community, which included understanding the current state of the information needs in the Australian Emergency Management community, clarifying those needs and developing a strategy and implementation plan to meet those needs. These were the first tottering steps of the AusDIN concept.

At this stage, GDIN had taken a very technological approach to the sharing of information and knowledge and a similar approach was taken with AusDIN. A presentation to the

Australian Emergency Management Committee failed to convince the committee of the value of a techno-centric solution to what was and is a very complex issue.

The AusDIN group continued to work away trying to demonstrate the value of its work. Many agencies were involved across the Commonwealth and States and Territories providing in-kind support with a significant input of dollars from what is now GeoScience Australia. Consultancies were let with a view to producing a proof of concept, Disaster Information Portal.

While this was occurring, at a different conceptual level, another aspect of AusDIN was at work. The group that was deliberating on the concept of the portal represented differing jurisdictions with differing requirements. Each brought to the table information and knowledge that had been distilled from within their jurisdictions. This was shared with the other representatives and in effect, a Network was in operation.

However, it must be said that the development of AusDIN from the November 2000 workshop was fragmented. This is not to devalue the work of the individuals and organisations that took part. Many long hours were worked but there were differing levels of commitments from the organisations involved. What AusDIN needed was a commitment from the peak body responsible for Emergency Management matters, the Australian Emergency Management Committee (~~of~~ AEMC).

In late 2002 a submission was developed for ~~the~~ AEMC consideration that focused on the knowledge management aspects of AusDIN, that is, the focus was on the actual information and knowledge sharing networks of people and organisations. The AEMC at its December 2002 meeting endorsed this wider ~~gave~~ AusDIN concept and formally established the AusDIN Working Group. The membership of this committee is drawn from the States and Territories, Commonwealth Departments and is chaired by EMA. The committee is able to invite interested parties to the meetings as required to address specific agenda items ~~its endorsement.~~

CURRENT STATUS

The development of the AusDIN concept will occur through two major activities. Firstly, ~~through the establishment the AusDIN Working Group creates of a forum through which strategic issues about~~ Network of people and organisations, in effect partnerships that will promote the sharing of information and knowledge can be addressed. ~~This will be guided by the AusDIN steering committee.~~ The second activity, subordinate to the first will revolve around the continued technical development of an Internet portal.

THE AUSDIN Portal – (www.ausdin.net.)

Representation on the AusDIN portal group is currently determined by the peak Emergency Management bodies within the States and Territories. The chairperson of the group is the Assistant Secretary of the Information Services Branch of the Attorney-General's Department. The Assistant Secretary Information Services will also occupy ~~occupies~~ a position on the AusDIN Steering Committee ~~steering committee~~. This linkage will ensure that the development of the physical Portal is in keeping with the knowledge building work occurring as part of ~~the greater~~ AusDIN.

There are many potential issues that the AusDIN portal group will need to address. Amongst these will be the level of content the portal will actually hold and in this consideration, how does it add value in relation to directing enquirers to where the information they require is held. To be truly of value, the portal must be more than just a glorified Google. The group will need to consider how AusDIN will link to other information networks.

The emergence of spatial information and associated Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and their value in relation to Emergency Management is increasing exponentially. One of the more pressing factors in relation to spatial information is the actual accessing of accurate datasets. The AusDIN portal could be seen to be the one “go to” place to be redirected to the correct source of spatial information.

The AusDIN portal will be but one mechanism for the sharing of knowledge and information amongst the Emergency Management community. The States and Territories have a number of initiatives proceeding along similar lines but in this regard, the AusDIN portal will not duplicate information held elsewhere.

THE AUSDIN WORKING GROUP

As you would know, the issue of connecting people and organisations with common interests and information needs is not something that can be solved solely with a black box approach. Certainly, the AusDIN portal will go some way to facilitating a connection but there is a human aspect that goes further. The AusDIN ~~Steering~~ Steering Committee will strive to connect people with other people and to facilitate a whole of government approach to strategic issues within the Emergency Management sector. A role you have no doubt been playing for years as library and information professionals.

The Emergency Management sector, like many other sectors can be characterised by the amount of information ~~overload~~ that is held in silos ~~occurring~~. In this sector, the lessons learnt from the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington continues to be a driver for change in the way in which we manage information.

There are a number of communities of practice occurring in and around the Emergency Management sector such as –Australian Librarians in Emergency Services (ALIES), the Department Of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries- Australia Animal Disease initiatives, Critical Infrastructure Protection and the Emergency Management Spatial Information Network Australia (EMSINA), all of which have different information and knowledge sharing issues but which more often than not will also have an impact on other parts of the sector.

AusDIN will assist in connecting ~~not reduce~~ these ~~flow of information but it will go some way toward improving the direction of information flows, by the connecting of~~ people with people whose information and knowledge ~~needs~~ may match or be complimentary. In this respect, AusDIN could be seen to allow a level of sharing ~~filtering~~ and value adding to new and existing information flows –that in effect will allow the better positioning of people and organisations to best share what is pertinent information and knowledge.

A commonly heard catch-cry these days goes something along the lines of organisations not reinventing the wheel. In our differing organisational silos, which that more often or not are made up of more subordinate silos, this has always been a challenge. I would humbly suggest that the reinvention of the wheel is only occurring because of the lack of knowledge being shared of similar endeavours in other organisations. AusDIN will create the linkages that will facilitate the two-way communication between organisations whose business needs are interrelated but may not have known of mutually relevant activities taking place.

Through this interaction, there will be a facilitation of sharing best practice amongst similar organisations. The network will facilitate the partnerships between organisations that might not necessarily be brought together.

Ultimately, the creation of partnerships is about increasing capability within the Emergency Management sector. The connection of information providers and users, both formally and informally, enhances the effectiveness of the flow of information.

THE WAY AHEAD

The AusDIN Charter encompasses;

- i) The promotion and facilitation of the sharing of Emergency Management related information and knowledge.
- ii) The development of relationships across jurisdictional boundaries that will enhance the information sharing capability of all EM sector agencies.
- iii) The sharing and disseminating of best practice examples and lessons on information relating to emergency and disaster management developments.

AusDIN will be able to facilitate a whole of government approach to Emergency Management, across the three tiers of government. The AusDIN Working Group will be made up of an agreed nucleus of representatives from all tiers of government. The committee will be enhanced by experts from chosen fields to address specific issues as required. This committee will be able to initiate the development of papers to elevate issues in Emergency Management to the key government decision makers.

The AusDIN portal has the potential to be the virtual “one stop shop” for Emergency Management information. In the one location, users will be able to link to pertinent Emergency Management information in a seamless manner.

The AusDIN Working Group has held several meetings. The foundations have been laid and a business plan for AusDIN’s future is being written. The priorities are to determine how to build upon and strengthen existing partnerships and identify potential new partnerships.

AusDIN will nurture innovation in Emergency Management by raising profiles of issues and supporting agencies involved in the resolution of issues. It will facilitate the mentoring of organisations by other organisation that have acquired expertise and experience that might not be readily apparent. AusDIN has the potential to reap immediate and short-term benefits but its real value is in the long term benefits that will be realised through the enhanced [sharingflow](#) of information and knowledge.

The theme of this conference is “A safe community: the information network”. I hope through my presentation today you have a better understanding of our concept of AusDIN. At the end of the day, through AusDIN, the Emergency Management sector and through it, the community will have better access to information and knowledge which in turn will facilitate our vision of safer sustainable communities.

THE LIBRARY NETWORK ROLE

It is obvious that the sharing of information and knowledge at all levels of the emergency management sector is critical. Those of us who serve as in the “information sector” have made this sharing into a profession. It is often the librarian who recognises that individuals are conducting similar research and put them in touch. We have also always been keen to establish our own networks to share information and resources between agencies. These natural occurring behaviours of ours are now being recognised and adopted into the larger arena of national emergency management.

The role of a library is to collect relevant resources, organise them in such a way as to make them easily retrievable, preserve them to provide a stable history of thought, and disseminate them to those who require the information. In the course of our core work, we are brought into contact with a diverse range of people with different qualifications, needs and experience. Through working with these individuals, we begin to build a more complete

knowledge of the scope of the subject. We also have the tools and skills to consult more widely and to bring together the world's best thought and experiences to add to those we have acquired. In sharing this information and connecting our people with new people and ideas, we have facilitated the acquisition of knowledge to the benefit of all. When libraries are able to link into networks, these benefits are multiplied many fold. The library has also always been seen as a safe and benign environment devoid of the politics and power plays associated with the workplace. Information is sought and shared freely at all levels. This is our great advantage.

Perhaps it would give a clearer picture of our library's role in emergency management if I explain how EMA fits into the Australian emergency management sector.

EMA'S ROLE

The prime responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment rests with the various States and Territories. However, the Australian Government is committed to supporting States and Territories in developing their capacity for dealing with emergencies and disasters, and provides physical assistance to requesting States or Territories when they cannot reasonably cope during an emergency. Under the Constitution, the Australian Government is allocated responsibility for external affairs matters including the provision of humanitarian assistance for emergency and refugee relief overseas. The Australian Government, through EMA, supports a comprehensive approach to emergency management. EMA pursues a cooperative and collaborative relationship with Australian Government agencies such as the Department of Finance and Administration, Geoscience Australia and the Bureau of Meteorology. In doing so, EMA seeks to encourage an "all agencies", "all hazards" approach to the prevention or mitigation of disasters, preparedness for their impact, response to that impact and recovery from the consequences.

EMA LIBRARY

The EMA Library is a national resource which supports the emergency management community through access to specialised information and client services. Our collection is unique in the southern hemisphere and includes both historical and contemporary resources on a wide spectrum of topics ranging from natural hazards to terrorism and technological hazards. Our coverage focuses on the all hazard all, agency approach which is to say that the emphasis is not so much on what caused the building to fall down, as what can be done to prevent, minimise, respond to and recover from the incident. We include information and thought from all levels of the sector including academics, managers, practitioners, and students.

Partnership agreements with a number of disaster research establishments in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada, Japan and New Zealand ensure receipt of materials otherwise unavailable in Australia. EMA library also values our partnerships with other agency libraries.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE

So much of our relevant material is impossible to find through the established book supply companies. This is the material published by governments, universities, emergency response agencies and individual practitioners. We rely on our regional and international partners to inform us of newly published resources and we in turn, share the many publications produced by EMA.

Our International Information Exchange agreements include the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the USA, the Office of Critical Infrastructure Protection and Emergency Preparedness (OC�PEP) in Canada, the Emergency Preparedness College

(EPC) in England and the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre (ADPC) in Thailand. Through these networks we are able to share information and contacts which strengthen the emergency management capacity of all the members.

ALIES

The Australasian Libraries in the Emergency Sector (ALIES) was originally formed out of a loose association of emergency services libraries in Victoria. This group would meet periodically and discuss common interests. The police libraries in Australia also had a chance to meet under Criminal Justice. Around 1990 the funding was withdrawn from the police and at the same time governments were beginning to stress that police, fire and emergency services needed to work more closely together sharing information and “lessons learned”. This was the perfect climate to form a national group of similar libraries in order to support these ideas. ALIES first workshop was hosted by EMA and held at Mt Macedon in September 1991. The name was adopted and guidelines were discussed. The next workshop in 1993 cemented the concept and formed a strong network between individuals that persisted and grew even in the absence of formal workshop gatherings. In more modern times we have convened an annual workshop with EMA funding, welcomed ALIES from New Zealand, formalised our network by adopting a charter, and written a strategic plan. We have drawn on the experience of InFire as inspiration for many of our policies and administration details. As Emergency Management has evolved away from purely response to a wider role of preparation, mitigation and recovery, we have added ALIES members to better reflect those agencies. The ALIES network is now gaining exposure and recognition outside the library walls right up to the highest authorities in the region through our involvement with AusDIN.

ALIES and AUSDIN

ALIES was a ready-made example of the cooperation and information sharing proposed, as previously explained, through AusDIN. We are united by a common listserve and are soon to have an interactive union catalogue of our serial holdings. We meet whenever possible in small groups and attend an annual 4 day workshop to exchange ideas, problems and solutions face to face. This knowledge is then returned to support the diverse agencies we represent for the benefit of all.

We have a member, currently Jenny Power, that represents ALIES to the portal working group and we have been asked to offer our unique skills in the organisation of the shared information. Work is currently underway to collate and establish a taxonomy and thesaurus for AusDIN which will be used in the building of the portal and standardisation of terms throughout the emergency sector. At last the skills and qualities that drive the library are recognised and appreciated in the wider world.