

INFORMATION CATALYSTS IN THE EMERGENCY SECTOR: PARTNERSHIPS THAT WORK!

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ABSTRACT

Australasian Libraries in the Emergency Sector (ALIES) is a cooperative information network supporting the information requirements of the emergency sector by sharing knowledge and resources to increase the information capacity of emergency management agencies. The ALIES network was formed in 1991 with a handful of libraries, and in 2008 now includes over 40 member organisations from Australia and New Zealand. In addition to the growth of the network, ALIES has developed a number of tools to facilitate the sharing of resources across the network, and established affordable access to electronic resources. ALIES members have also played an important role in contributing to national projects in the emergency sector.

So what is it that makes this partnership work so well? ALIES works as a community of practice, providing an opportunity to exchange ideas, knowledge, experience, skills and resources, as well as a mechanism for contributing to wider policy issues affecting emergency management practices. This paper will examine the value of partnerships and relationship management from the individual, organisational, national and international perspectives. This includes the commitment from individuals and organisations, the support and expectations of the sector, and the strength of a collaborative approach. It will also identify how ALIES has improved the information capacity of the Australasian emergency sector, the achievements of the network so far, and the planning that is taking place to move ALIES and its member libraries forward in the emergency sector information environment. And importantly, how lessons learned by ALIES can benefit the library and information sector more broadly.

BODY OF PAPER

INTRODUCTION

Australasian Libraries in the Emergency Sector (ALIES) is a cooperative information network which aims to serve the common interests of emergency management agencies. ALIES supports the information requirements of the emergency sector by sharing knowledge and resources within Australia and New Zealand, to increase the information capacity of emergency management agencies. The network collaborates to exchange and share knowledge, skills and resources, to maintain a distributed Australasian emergency management library collection, and to provide an expert information service to the emergency sector.

ALIES are information catalysts in the emergency sector, with an aim of improving the information capacity of the Australasian emergency sector. ALIES libraries work in partnership to fulfil the information needs of the emergency sector through the commitment from individuals and organisations and the strength of a collaborative approach. Since its inception, the ALIES library network has expanded in size and formalised its governance procedures. It is the aim of this paper to describe the benefits that a network such as ALIES can have for individuals, libraries, organisations and the industry, and the key ingredients that make a network like ALIES work so well. In doing so, the achievements of the network will be described with reference to the future planning that will move ALIES forward in the emergency sector information environment.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Emergency management encompasses a wide range of measures to manage risks to the safety and sustainability of communities and the environment (EMA 2008). Australia has adopted a comprehensive and integrated approach to the development of its arrangements and programs for the effective management of emergencies and disasters. This involves a collaborative and coordinated whole of government management of risks to the Australian community (EMA 2004). In Australia, prime responsibility for the protection of life, property and the environment rests with the 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.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the peak inter-governmental forum in Australia, is a significant initiator in the development of emergency management policy. Following recommendations from the COAG review *Natural Disasters in Australia* (COAG 2004), new national decision-making machinery was established to oversee national emergency management arrangements and to drive the implementation of national initiatives. This framework includes the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management (MCPPEM) and a revised Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC) that functions as a primary decision-making body for emergency management policy issues (EMA 2008). The AEMC is chaired by the Secretary of the

Attorney-General's Department and comprises chairpersons and executive officers of State emergency management committees.

At the Australian Government level, Emergency Management Australia, a division of the Attorney-General's Department, is the agency responsible for emergency management policy and provides a strategic coordination role. EMA fosters and administers active partnerships with a network of Australian and State or Territory government agencies, local government, volunteers, non-government and community organisations, businesses, professional bodies, individuals and international agencies. Together, these agencies develop and deliver best practice emergency management in Australia.

ALIES BACKGROUND

The ALIES network was formed in 1991 and included a handful of emergency service libraries. The network evolved in following years to have an Australasian focus, allowing greater collaboration and information exchange between libraries in the Asia-Pacific region. By 2003 ALIES had 26 member libraries, and in 2008 has grown to include 42 member organisations from Australia and New Zealand. Membership of ALIES has grown particularly quickly in the last few years as the realisation that more libraries (and their parent organisations) have a role to play in a whole-of-government approach to emergency management. In particular, this has seen the network move from a strictly 'emergency service' base, to a broader membership base that covers the full spectrum of emergency management. This has led to an increase in members from the recovery, science and environment areas.

ALIES is governed by a formalised Charter providing a statement of purpose, membership criteria, and roles of committees (ALIES 2007a). An Executive Committee of elected members is responsible for managing the affairs of the network. Member libraries range from police, fire and ambulance services, through to state and federal government departments and non-government organisations (*see www.ema.gov.au/alies for a list of current members*). A formal application process for membership is followed, using a membership package developed by the ALIES Executive Committee. Membership of ALIES is based on the involvement of a library's parent organisation in activities related to at least one of the four stages of emergency management – Prevention/Mitigation, Preparedness, Response, and Recovery. ALIES library collections contain Australasian and international resources in subject areas across the emergency management sector including: policing, criminology, security, intelligence, law, science, environment, hazards, disasters, epidemics, fire, ambulance and emergency services.

ALIES libraries vary from multi-branch government library services to small one person libraries. There are a number of 'big issues' that these libraries face and these are relevant across the special library sector, such as downsizing, organisational restructure, changes in management, and budget size. In addition, marketing of the library within our organisations and externally is important, as well as changing services to meet the demands of users. In relation to the delivery of library services ALIES libraries are particularly focused on targeted information services, online delivery of services, and delivery of services over distance, training and e-learning. ALIES library professionals may have titles as diverse as librarians, knowledge managers, or information specialists,

but our common goal is to promote the professional status of emergency management agency librarians and the importance of libraries and information services.

ALIES – A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In many ways, ALIES can be best described as a ‘community of practice’. The community of practice model of knowledge management has a number of key features that are clearly evident in the ALIES network. These characteristics include membership based on participation, a sense of joint enterprise, relationships of mutual engagement uniting members as a social body, a range of shared resources developed jointly by members over time, and evidence of learning together and joining in informal discussion to help each other overcome problems (Wagner 2000 in Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin 2003). ALIES works effectively as a community of practice, providing an opportunity to exchange ideas, knowledge, experience, skills and resources, as well as a mechanism for contributing to wider policy issues affecting emergency management practices. Members participate actively in the group, working together to develop tools for use by the network and to solve problems that are common amongst our libraries.

Wilding (2002) clearly articulates that ‘partnerships present libraries with new tools to bring the most effective services to their users at the most affordable costs’. Similarly, ALIES libraries collaborate in partnership to provide effective and cost efficient information services to the emergency management community. Wilding (2002) defines partnerships as relationships which tend to be formal in nature and entered into by equal parties with a shared interest in accomplishing common goals. The partnership within the ALIES network is based on the ALIES charter (ALIES 2007a) which provides a formal framework for the direction of the network and common goals to work towards. The development and maintenance of relationships within the network is as important to the individual members as it is to the network and its continuity. The ongoing development of long term partnerships, such as ALIES, can assist in promoting common interests, helping to find solutions and gaining political support (Penniman 1997 in Hennessy & Mann-Henderson 2001).

BENEFITS OF ALIES

The benefits of the ALIES network are far reaching, starting with the individual, the library and the organisation and extending to the emergency management sector throughout Australasia and internationally.

Benefits to individuals

The benefits to the individual include the extensive opportunities for professional development, through the sharing of knowledge via the e-list and ALIES forums, and through the high calibre of speakers and workshops provided at the annual conference. Workshops that have been provided at past conferences have included creating strategic plans for member libraries and ALIES, creating marketing plans for member libraries, Web 2.0 technology, and training on collecting meaningful statistics.

The opportunity for the individual to work on an ALIES committee is also a great professional development opportunity. The skills gained from serving on one or more of

the committees or sub-committees include strategic planning, governance expertise associated with developing the network, conference planning, marketing, ICT, consortia negotiating, recruitment, and liaising with other groups in the emergency sector. These are skills that can be taken back and used in your own library or on other committees or networks you are involved in or wish to establish.

The professional peer support and formal and informal forums available to ALIES members are of particular importance to librarians working in one-person libraries. The opportunity to raise questions, share skills, knowledge and expertise and collaborate with other librarians in the same industry, serve to enhance the individual's professional development and support him/her in what can be an isolating role for some librarians.

Benefits to libraries

The benefits for libraries include cost savings gained through sharing resources via inter-library loans, document delivery and consortia arrangements. Whilst providing access to a broader range of information and resources on emergency management, this enables libraries to offer an extended and higher level reference and information service. This informal collaborative collection development provides benefits to libraries by reducing duplication of resources. Time and resources can be focused on establishing specific and relevant collections, whilst still maintaining access to broader emergency management content through other libraries in ALIES. Not only is the sharing of resources of benefit to ALIES, but the sharing of library knowledge and skills and professional expertise benefits the growth and development of each ALIES library. Being part of an international pool of knowledge and resources and being able to draw on the experience of other librarians in your specialist field value-adds and strengthens representation, recognition and credibility of each library and the profession within each agency and in external agencies and organisations in the emergency sector.

Benefits to organisations

The benefits to the ALIES members' organisations include several mentioned earlier, such as the cost benefits of shared resources and consortia arrangements, and the extensive professional support and development available to library staff which they would not otherwise have access to. The ALIES network also provides organisations with access to experts and grey literature, for example, internal policies, procedures and practices in other organisations within the emergency sector. Through ALIES, organisations also have links to other national and international networks, therefore increasing the pool of knowledge and information they have access to and the timely and direct fashion in which they can tap into it.

Benefits to the national emergency management sector

The coordinated national and regional approach to collecting and distributing information and resources on emergency management is of benefit to the emergency management sector at large and therefore the nation. ALIES ensures that the right information gets to the right people at the right time throughout Australasia, leading to a safer community. Although outcomes are hard to measure, ALIES does contribute to building the capacity of the emergency management sector by keeping key stakeholders

informed, and by breaking down ‘silos’ that occur in jurisdictions by facilitating the timely flow of information between jurisdictions and emergency management agencies. ALIES has recognition in national forums as a ‘go to’ body for projects of national significance, for example, AusDIN, National Spatial and Information Management Working Group (NSIM) projects, Bushfire CRC / AFAC’s Fire Knowledge Network, and Emergency Management Metadata Profile development.

Benefits internationally

ALIES libraries are also entry points for connecting to information on and subject experts in emergency management internationally. ALIES libraries have greater access collaboratively to international networks than individually, for example the international network for Fire Information and Reference Exchange (inFIRE), World Criminal Justice Libraries Network, and other subject specific networks. Through these international networks ALIES members bring back shared library knowledge to the ALIES network through e-lists, conferences, committees and collaborative projects. The ALIES network has facilitated the increased communication between Australia and New Zealand, therefore sharing knowledge and collaborating. ALIES stands up as a model of best practice within the emergency management library sector internationally, therefore providing the example and the tools for other libraries around the world to successfully establish or enhance their own library network.

SECRETS OF A SUCCESSFUL NETWORK

Identifying an existing need

For a library network to succeed, it is important to first identify an existing need for the group. When ALIES commenced in 1991, emergency services libraries in Australia were often very small, staff numbers and resources were limited, and the libraries were sometimes isolated by distance and jurisdiction. These librarians saw the need and value in sharing resources, skills and experiences and decided to pool their resources to better meet the needs of their own organisations. The network continued on an informal basis until events such as the 9/11 and Bali terrorist attacks, the 2003 Canberra firestorm and the Foot and Mouth outbreak in the UK highlighted an imperative for wider access and improved sharing of information within the emergency management sector.

Common vision and information needs

Without sharing a common subject area or information need, establishing consortia arrangements and collaborative collections, and sharing resources is very difficult. Hence, one of the criteria necessary for establishing a successful library network is to ensure that member libraries share an information need. Tied in with this is the need for commonality amongst the parent organisations’ goals and objectives, which the library network is aiming to meet as well. Therefore with everyone working toward a common goal the success of the network is likely.

Obtaining buy-in

An essential component to the success of a library network is getting the buy-in, support and commitment of libraries, organisations, peak bodies and government. Library staff need to be able to commit time – time to serve on committees, attend conferences, assist with reference, research and information requests from other libraries, and to assist with sharing library expertise, skills, knowledge and experience. Libraries need to be able and willing to make some financial commitments to shared technology, databases, resources and events. And there needs to be a common vision, collaborative approach, commitment and passion displayed by members of the network.

The librarian needs to obtain buy-in and support from management within their organisation. By selling the benefits and showing a need for the network, as well as explaining the commitment needed to make the network work, the support, understanding and recognition of its value given by management should be of a high level.

Obtaining buy-in from peak bodies and government has to be obtained by showing a need for the network, illustrating how the work of the network will meet government objectives, and explaining the functions of the network and what is in it for them. In return recognition, support and funding can be requested.

Governance

The structure and activities of the network is governed by a formalised Charter which outlines the purpose, vision and aims of the network, membership criteria and conditions, rules of procedure and the roles of committees (ALIES 2007a). This document is valuable as it consolidates the network and provides a management structure which assists the Executive Committee to provide direction and guidance to other committees in the network and members at large.

It is also important for the roles of all committees to be clearly defined, not only through the Charter but through formalised documents setting out membership, purpose, responsibilities, communication and reporting requirements of each committee. For example, the ALIES Executive Committee is supported by a range of committees with responsibility for conference planning, ICT, marketing, consortia and other projects. These committees are required to submit quarterly reports to the Executive.

Establish goals and objectives

A Strategic Directions and Action Plan is an essential document as it sets out clear and agreed objectives. It outlines the strategies and actions to be undertaken to meet the objectives, the time frames in which they are to be completed, who is responsible for ensuring they are met, evidence of value for management through key performance indicators and ensures that the network members have a common focus.

The five objectives in the ALIES Strategic Directions and Actions Plan are:

- Individual library services are augmented by collective resources of the group
- An enhanced knowledge sharing network to support libraries within the emergency management sector

- Effective communication within the ALIES network
- Membership meets the aims of the network
- ALIES is a high profile recognised network (ALIES 2007b)

Networking and professional development

Offering opportunities for networking and coordinating professional development activities that relate to the needs of the network are important ingredients in sustaining the passion, growth and development of the people and network. With this comes the need for enablers, tools and technology to facilitate networking, collaboration and sharing of information over vast geographic distances. Examples of enablers and tools are: annual conferences, regional meetings, e-lists, wikis, blogs, an online collaboration portal, a website, and social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

Marketing

An essential factor in the success of a library network is marketing. It is important to market the network within your agencies, the industry which you support and the library industry. This is achieved through developing a brand, tag-line, logo, brochure and poster and through writing articles in journals, giving presentations, and through advertising via other library networks, national government forums, and at conferences. Getting word out there of your network's existence and capabilities is fundamental in establishing and consolidating your network's reputation as a recognised body and a 'go to' for information and knowledge requirements throughout your sector.

Continued Passion and Commitment

Finally, to sustain the success of the network and foster its growth and development, members need to be passionate about it and be committed to making it work. Members need to see the network as an integral part of their enhanced library service, and be prepared to offer and share their time, ideas and resources with other members.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES OF ALIES

ALIES has enhanced the information capacity of the Australasian emergency sector in a range of ways since moving from a very small and informal emergency services network to a formalised and self-governing network that incorporates members from the broader emergency sector. The major achievements and activities of ALIES are as follows.

ALIES Conference

The ALIES conference/workshops, held annually since 2002, have become a regular and highly valued experience for ALIES librarians. Each conference provides a forum for library professionals to engage with their colleagues and discuss ideas that ultimately benefit the emergency management sector. Hosted and funded by the Australian Government through Emergency Management Australia at the Institute in Mount Macedon, Victoria, the annual conference is a valuable investment in the development of networks, knowledge transfer and professional practice. Apart from the obvious benefits of face-to-face networking, idea sharing and professional development, the conference

provides an opportunity for planning and to identify key issues and projects for ALIES across the next twelve months, and into the future.

The ALIES 2008 conference held from 16-20 March 2008 was attended by 46 representatives from 37 ALIES Libraries. The theme of the conference was 'ALIES 3.0: information catalysts' and reflected the impact of Web 2.0 technology on libraries and how the ALIES network is evolving in a changing information environment. .

It is clear from the high calibre of speakers at the conference that the ALIES profile is increasing within the emergency management sector and the library industry. Past speakers have included Tony Pearce (Director General, Emergency Management Australia), Anne-Marie Schwirtlich (CEO & State Librarian, State Library of Victoria), Christine Mackenzie (CEO, Yarra Plenty Regional Library), Christine Nixon (Victoria Police Commissioner) and Roxanne Missingham (Australian Parliamentary Librarian).

Tools for collaboration

Over recent years, ALIES has developed a number of tools to facilitate the sharing of resources across the network, and established affordable access to electronic resources. These include a gratis Document Delivery network which includes the journal holdings of ALIES members (ALIESnet), the ALIES e-list to communicate with members, the ALIES website which includes a directory of member libraries, and an online secure 'Quickplace' for sharing information and managing knowledge. These tools have enabled the ALIES network to communicate easily and share resources in a cost effective manner.

Consortia

A specifically tasked ALIES Consortia Committee has responsibility for developing consortia arrangements to a range of online databases specific to the needs of the network. In the 2007/08 financial year, ALIES Consortia arrangements saved member organisations a combined total of approximately \$340,000 (ALIES 2008). Through negotiation with a number of vendors ALIES has been able to greatly enhance the resources available to the emergency management sector, whilst saving thousands of dollars for individual libraries and ALIES organisations through a coordinated approach to consortia.

Increased profile within the sector

The involvement of the network in national forums has increased due to the heightened profile of ALIES, which is now recognised as a national group reporting to the NSIM (National Spatial and Information Management) Working Group. Chaired by the Attorney-General's Department, NSIM includes representatives of all States and Territories and key Commonwealth agencies with responsibility in this area. Under the strategic direction of national government committees including the Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC), the National Committee on Critical Infrastructure Protection (NCCIP) and the National Counter-Terrorism Committee (NCTC), the role of the NSIM Working Group is to enhance decision support capabilities through access and use of relevant information, including spatial information,

within and between the Australian Government, states and territories and local government. The structure of the NSIM Working Group as set out in the new Terms of Reference determined that ALIES was one of several national groups reporting directly to NSIM Working Group. It is important for ALIES to be represented at such a high level national forum within the emergency sector.

To increase the ALIES profile within member agencies and the emergency sector, the ALIES Marketing Committee was tasked with the redevelopment of the ALIES logo during the 2007/08 period. This was assisted with funds provided by Emergency Management Australia to pay for the professional design of a logo and brochure. The aim for this was to assist with publicising the existence and importance of ALIES within our parent organisations, the library and information sector, and to the wider emergency sector community. The network now has an easily identifiable logo, a simple tagline 'information catalysts' which reflects what we are and what we do, and a range of professionally designed promotional tools including a brochure, poster, and letterhead for use in all official ALIES business. The ALIES logo and tagline assists in marketing the network as a brand across the sector. As the profile of ALIES increases there has been interest from libraries wanting to join the network.

Projects of national significance

Increasingly, the expertise of ALIES members is being sought on a regular basis for contribution to national projects.

ALIES has been an important contributor to the development of the Australian Disaster Information Network (AusDIN) portal. The AusDIN portal is a gateway to online websites and resources of emergency management related information from all levels of government (AUSDIN 2008). ALIES is a member of the national AusDIN Portal Working Group, chaired by the Attorney-General's Department and including State, Territory and Commonwealth government representatives. ALIES has contributed advice and assistance with the development of the portal, particularly in relation to taxonomy development, adopting standards for metadata, thesaurus terms and taxonomies, and determining governance issues. Additionally, ALIES librarians have a continuing role in coordinating information collection, maintaining standards and marketing the portal to practitioners in the emergency sector. The success of the AusDIN Portal project has the potential to raise the profile of ALIES in the sector.

ALIES has recently been involved in the development of an Emergency Management Metadata Profile with XML Syntax. The profile is designed to create standardisation across the emergency management sector, to ensure interoperability between agencies and across a range of data sources. An ALIES representative is a member of the project team developing this industry metadata standard.

The ALIES Thesaurus Working Group assisted in the review of the Australian Emergency Management Terms Thesaurus. The working group conducted a survey on the use of the thesaurus, assisted in the review of terminology, collated a list of terms for inclusion in the revision of the thesaurus, and identified key terminology and subject areas requiring attention. The redeveloped thesaurus is now available online

(www.ema.gov.au/thesaurus) and is a national resource for the emergency management sector in Australia and more broadly as an information tool internationally.

WHAT NEXT FOR ALIES

The future holds some interesting options for ALIES. At the recent 2008 conference, members participated in strategic planning workshops to move ALIES forward. A number of key themes came out of this planning, which are being further developed by ALIES committees. Some of the future initiatives of ALIES include:

- Redevelopment of ALIES website to incorporate Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis and blogs. This may involve looking at alternative web hosting arrangements.
- The development of a virtual reference and information service for the Australasian emergency sector. A proposal is currently being developed to establish service along similar lines to the “Ask Now” service provided by the National and State Libraries Australasia (Davis 2007),
- Formalised collaborative collection development. This may include the development of a collaborative collection development policy, or memoranda of understanding between libraries describing collection responsibilities of libraries for specific subject areas
- Development of one point of access for ALIES library collections. The aim is for federated searching of ALIES library catalogues, but this has some difficulties to overcome. Security requirements of many ALIES organisations prevent library catalogues from being available outside their agency firewalls.
- Expanding our community of practice, to share our expertise more effectively with the broader library sector.

Some of these projects are quite ambitious, but the passion and dedication of members will drive the future success of the network. Additionally, as we raise the ALIES profile in the emergency sector the challenge for the network is how to manage an increased reliance on ALIES. With many of our members as one-person or small libraries with sizeable workloads, the question is whether we have the necessary resources to further these projects, or assist with project work at a national level when requested, which is increasing.

CONCLUSION

Clearly the ALIES library network has come a long way from humble beginnings. The network is now a formalised and well respected entity within the emergency sector and the library industry. Whilst ALIES is continuing to achieve its role as a cooperative information network which aims to serve the common interests of emergency management agencies, there are always new and innovative methods to consider in the development of resources and services of the network. It is hoped that the lessons learnt by ALIES can benefit the library and information industry, particularly for those practitioners considering the establishment or reinvigoration of their own professional

networks. It is clear that partnerships within the library and information industry can have significant benefits for individuals, libraries, organisations and the nation as a whole.

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BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTERS

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Troy has thirteen years experience working in public, school and government libraries and has been managing the Emergency Management Australia Library since September 2006. He has a BA (LIS) from Charles Sturt University and is a representative on the Australasian Libraries In the Emergency Sector (ALIES) Executive Committee.

Enola Johnson

Enola has been working in libraries in the emergency sector for five years with previous experience in public libraries and at the State Library of Tasmania. She has a BA (Info

Mgt) from University of Canberra and is the current Secretary on the Australasian Libraries in the Emergency Sector (ALIES) Executive Committee.