Helping Communities In Times Of Emergencies: The Responsibility Of All Broadcasters
From The Editor

The BTS Fall Symposium

By James E. O’Neal, Editor-in-Chief, BTS Life Member

I’ve said it before on this page, and will say it again—busy times, these! Things really go into high gear at this time of year in terms of the technical conferences, trade shows, seminars and the like.

It seems like only a few days ago I was in Amsterdam sitting around the BTS table at the IBC’s Partnership Village” discussing the show with other Society members, last week it was the BTS Fall Symposium (more about which in just a moment). And as I write this, I’m sitting in an Amtrak train car, bound for the NAB Show NY. In just a few more days, the annual SMPTE Conference and Exposition is happening in Los Angeles. A few weeks later, there’s the Government Video Expo in Washington, D.C., and it won’t be long before we arrive in the new year, with the HPA Tech Retreat, the NAB Show, ATSC annual meeting, and more beginning to appear on event calendar. One of the great things about our Society is its members’ participation in such events. No matter where you go, or what broadcast-related show or conference you attend, you’re going to find BTS people, and almost always they’re part of the program! Our members are truly “the leaders of the pack” when it comes to innovation and new technologies in the field of broadcasting and content production and dissemination. If you need a reason to join the BTS or renew your membership, this is one of the better ones!

Back to the just-ended Symposium, after four years on the road (San Diego, San Antonio, Orlando, and Hartford), it circled back to its “home base” in the Washington, D.C. area (actually, just across the Potomac River in Arlington, Va. At one point in the proceedings, Symposium co-chair Bob Weller asked for a show of hands, with the question being “is this your first Symposium?” “your 10th, perhaps?” “okay, maybe your 67th!” A number of hands went up in answer to the first question, quite a number were raised in response to the second, but there were no takers for the last. Yes, the Symposium has been an annual event since 1950! (You would have to been pretty young to have made that one and still be part of the crowd at this year’s event.)

When you think about the amount of changes in our business in the past 67 years, it’s positively mind boggling. For those who were a bit too young to remember what it was like then, radio still ruled the roost—AM radio that is. A few stations were transmitting in the newly opened 88–108 MHz band, but there weren’t that many sets in listeners’ hands. Television was off and running in the U.S. and several other parts of the world, but picture quality wasn’t that great, receivers were quite expensive (even the cheapest U.S. sets sold for more than $1,000 in today’s money), programs were limited to a few hours a day, and there wasn’t much choice, as the U.S. had only just been connected for coast-to-coast video and the pathing then only served major population centers. Color had been approved, but the standard selected by the FCC was not backwardly compatible with the million or so black-and-white receivers in viewers’ homes, so it didn’t really get much traction. There was no video tape, no stereo sound being broadcast, no communication satellites, no fiber networks, no UHF television

Cover: The October flooding from Hurricane Harvey left much of the Houston, Texas area under water. Broadcasters were there to provide warnings and emergency instructions. Read about broadcast emergency alerting systems in the United States and other areas of the world in this issue.
broadcasting, no PCs; not even any electronic calculators. The transistor was not quite three years old, and could do very little then beyond amplifying audio (the making and selling vacuum tubes was still a very big business). And digital electronics was little more than a gleam in the eye of some of the best and brightest scientists at places such as Bell Laboratories (remember them).

It would be interesting to look at the agenda and the names of the presenters at that first IEEE Broadcast Symposium. (Does anyone by chance have a copy of that program lying around? I’d love to reproduce it in these pages.)

I’ve attended a fair number of Symposia over the years and am always astounded by the amount of useful information presented at these events. This year’s conference was no exception: ATSC 3.0, UHD, the U.S. TV spectrum repack, digital radio broadcasting, cybersecurity, the use of drone aircraft in RF measurements, and so much more. Even good-ole AM broadcasting made the program, with a presentation on an effort to provide better signals and service in Miami, Fla. and the surrounding region.

If you didn’t get to attend this year’s Symposium, you missed a really good one. Hats off the men and women who worked so hard to make the event a success. You need to go ahead and set up a reminder in Outlook (or wherever you keep such memory joggers) to clear Oct. 9–11 for the 2018 Symposium. It’s staying put at this year’s venue, the Key Bridge Marriott in Arlington, Va. I hope to see you there!

Moving on, perhaps you noticed that the cover of this issue is a bit different from anything we’ve done in the past. What’s a flood have to do with broadcasting? Well, actually a lot. It’s ties into one of the reasons we exist as an industry. One of the precepts established back in the 1920s when broadcasting in U.S. was beginning to move out was its “service to the public” element. A broadcast license was only issued to groups or individuals who vowed to provide serve in the public’s “interest, convenience and necessity.” Technology has changed a lot over the years; that founding precept has not.

It seems as if we’ve had more than our share of really terrible natural disasters recently—three super hurricanes in a row hitting U.S. coastal cities and Caribbean islands really hard, devastating earthquakes in Mexico, miles and miles of northern California left barren because of wildfires—you name it, if it was bad and hurt people, it seems to have happened in the last few months. And broadcasters did their part to aid and assist their viewing and listening communities in such disasters. More than once in my career in broadcasting, I’ve had people—strangers in many cases—tell me how glad they were to be able to turn on the radio or TV and receive information about approaching storms, evacuation routes, emergency shelters, and the like. Yes, smart phones and tablets are nice for pulling in such information too, but as we all know from experience—Hurricane Sandy immediately comes to mind—they are only as good as the cell sites they’re being fed from. And broadcasters have seen to it that their transmission facilities are much more robust and resilient than the cell sites of Ma Bell and the rest of the wireless broadband providers. It’s in times of disaster that our fraternity really shines! Mindful of this (and reflecting on the fact that in the United States, at least, September is “National Emergency Preparedness Month,” I’ve tried to pull together some articles on the place of broadcasters in emergency alerting in both the U.S. and other parts of the world. I hope that you enjoy reading these articles, and in doing so, reflect on the great responsibility that our industry has in helping to safeguard lives.

Lastly, I want to again extend thanks to BTS members for stepping up to the plate to assist in providing content for this issue and helping to make this a better publication. Samina Hu-sain and Rafael Sotelo both deserve a big thank you this time around! I’d also like to extend special “thanks” to Watt Har-rison for taking time to relate his “learning moment” for our “Downward Path To Broadcast Engineering” feature. I’ve been getting positive feedback ever since this addition to Broadcast Technology was launched some nine issues ago. I want to keep it going, but I can’t do it without your help.

Please take a few moments to jot down similar experiences in your career so that others can learn from them.

Thanks.

James O’Neal
Editor
Broadcast Technology
BTSeditor@IEEE.org
EAS And AWARN: Planning The Future Of Emergency Alerts

A look at past and present methods in the United States for alerting citizens to emergencies

By Bob Kovacs

ALEXANDRIA, VA. As communications systems in the United States have grown in complexity, so too has the means to alert citizens of emergencies and serious conditions. In the broadcast industry, this notification system has evolved from CONELRAD (Control of Electromagnetic Radiation), the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS), and now the Emergency Alert System (EAS).