

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES- IF IT'S FLOODED FORGET IT

Non-peer reviewed research proceedings from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards
CRC & AFAC conference

Perth, 5 – 8 September 2018

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Version	Release history	Date
1.0	Initial release of document	05/09/2018



Australian Government
Department of Industry,
Innovation and Science

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Cooperative Research
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Publisher:

Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC

September 2018

Citation: Kamel, S. (2018). Real stories, real people- if it's flooded forget it. In J.Bates (Ed.), *Research Forum 2018: proceedings from the Research Forum at the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC & AFAC Conference*. Perth: Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC.

ABSTRACT

Between 2000 and 2015, 178 people died from floods in Australia. Despite the strong messaging from emergency services, people continue to drive or walk through floodwater, putting their lives at risk. In response, the NSW State Emergency Service has developed a range of video stories depicting people's decision making processes and experiences entering floodwater and activated them as part of a comprehensive social media campaign - thereby incorporating a modern day approach to engage with the community about the dangers of entering floodwater. The videos present the real people recounting their decision to drive through floodwater, the consequences of their actions and the take home message. Evidence from commissioned research and research from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre determined the themes of these stories. The stories include: Sonya, a mother that crossed a flooded river due to peer pressure from her passengers; Peter, a farmer who nearly drowned after entering floodwater to rescue cattle; Tom, a young man that entered floodwater to impress girls in the car and Jaime, a mother who turned around for fear of putting the lives of her children at risk. During the 6 week campaign, the content was seen over 800,000 times, and videos were viewed more than 400,000 times. The campaign reached over 150,000 individual young men in NSW, and over half a million more people outside of the target group. Engagement with the campaign was also high, with 28,000 people liking, sharing, or commenting. In 2016 the project was awarded the Government section of the NSW Resilient Australia Awards.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Australia's increase in population, along with where people are choosing to live, makes us more vulnerable to the impact of severe weather events. Relying on emergency management organisations to provide all the required resources to respond to these weather events is not sustainable. The National Strategy for Disaster Resilience emphasises the importance of shared responsibility between governments, business, communities and individuals and promotes a shift from Government intervention to developing community resilience. People need to take greater responsibility for their own safety and act on information, advice and other cues provided before, during and after a disaster to protect themselves, their family, friends and property.

In April 2015, the Hunter region was affected by wild weather, which brought heavy rainfall and storms resulting in significant infrastructure damage and the deaths of four people. In 2016, the NSW State Emergency Service was funded as part of the NSW Office of Emergency Management's State Emergency Management Projects Program grant funding round to undertake the Post Disaster Research and Innovation Project.

This project gathered evidence to develop a better understanding of community response behaviour and attitudes to the April 2015 superstorm, well as the decision making processes and risk perception people experience when confronted with warnings and key risks during floods. The research also expected to determine the factors that contribute to positive community action and safe decision-making. The project engaged the University of Newcastle to undertake this research; 79 one-on-one interviews and four focus groups were conducted with residents of the Hunter region, focusing primarily on Dungog, Millers Forest, Gillieston Heights and Hinton. Furthermore, observations and interviews were completed with residents in two communities where community-led disaster planning was taking place at the time. This research has resulted in the Stronger for the Storm report; this report consolidates the growing evidence of the importance of communities and emergency management organisations working together when planning for and responding to natural disasters. Furthermore, it highlights the desire for communities to embrace the shared responsibility ethos. It is important that emergency management organisations continue to work effectively with communities to harness this desire to achieve positive outcomes for both Government and communities.

An additional component of this project was to develop a range of "survivor" video stories of people who had entered floodwater with the intention of using them as part of a community engagement program as well as to support safety messaging through online platforms such as Facebook. The focus of the stories was to further explore the decision making process from the perspective of a community member. Using real people's true stories can act as a great catalyst for developing an emotional human connection and result in authentic engagement with an audience. It provides an opportunity to encourage people to share their own stories and this in turn can add much more depth to the message.

The NSW SES worked with Why Documentaries, a Wollongong based video production company that specialises in creating stories that audiences can connect with to create public awareness campaigns. The stories selected were based on the themes that emerged from the Stronger for the Storm report as well as complementary research from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre: "An analysis of human fatalities from flood hazards in Australia, 1990-2015". These reports provide insights into the "who" and "why" of people who are losing or almost losing their life to drowning as well as some of the decision making thought processes involved when people encounter floodwater on their journey

The research indicates:

- 58% of fatalities since 2000 have occurred within 20kms of the victim's home, suggesting they are familiar with the roads and their environment.
- 79% of people who die in floodwater are men, with young men under 29 being the most at risk.
- Witness statements suggest that the majority of victims are aware of the flood (60%) but the speed and depth of the water took them by surprise.
- The majority of flood fatalities (45%) are attempting to cross a flooded road, causeway or bridge.
- Children and young adults make up a high proportion of passengers killed, while in a vehicle driven through floodwater.
- Flood fatalities in 4WDs have dramatically increased over the last 15 years.
- People risk their lives in order to save their pets and livestock

With these statistics in mind, the NSW SES hand-picked four stories that engaged a peer to peer approach to highlight the dangers and risks of entering floodwater to the identified at-risk populations. Stories were sourced through word of mouth as well as via an online recruitment campaign where community members were invited to share their stories of entering floodwater on the NSW SES Facebook page. More than 50 stories were shared online and those people whose experience had the potential to deliver a strong message of the dangers of entering floodwater were followed up with direct messaging through Facebook. A key strategy was to utilise real community members, who were willing to talk publicly about their behaviour, take responsibility for their actions and had learnt from their behaviour. The people who chose to have their stories filmed stated their motivation for doing so was to save lives - so that other people did not make the same choices, they had made which had put their life and the life of others at risk.



Images courtesy of Stronger for the Storm report

These "survivor" video stories present the actual people recounting and re-enacting their real life experience of their decisions about entering floodwater, what happened and the consequences of their actions. The stories highlight the dangers and risks associated with entering floodwater.

The stories are:

Always that unknown risk. By Sonya.

Sonya is a mother who crossed a flooded river causeway in her 4WD, due to peer pressure from the passengers in the car - her four children.

Plan Ahead. By Peter

Peter is a farmer, who nearly drowned after entering floodwater to rescue cattle but was saved by his son; sadly his pet dog drowned.

A costly decision. In more ways than one ... By Tom

Tom, a young man that drove through floodwater to impress his girlfriend. His car was a write off and a few weeks later his girl "dumped" him.

Go the long way. By Jaime

Jaime is a mother that turned around based on a fear of putting the lives of her children at risk.



Statistics from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre: "An analysis of human fatalities from flood hazards in Australia, 1990-2015" were included in the videos to provide an evidence base to the risks of entering floodwater.

In addition to the four "survivor" stories, three further video stories have been created; one that shares the experience and knowledge of "Mad Matt" a YouTuber and 4WD enthusiast; one of a SES volunteer, who responds to triple 000 callouts when people are either stuck or missing in floodwater and the final video is a montage of community people pledging not to enter floodwater themselves or encourage a driver to do so.

These stories were then used as the basis to deliver a comprehensive six week social media flood safety campaign in early 2017. The NSW SES sought permission to use the Queensland Government's floodwater-safety campaign "IF IT'S FLOODED FORGET IT" messaging¹ - but also target at risk populations including young men under 29 and farmers through real-life community story-telling. Each story comprises of the following collateral: a 3-minute video, a 1-minute video, 15- second video tiles, word tiles, Tweets and Facebook posts (see Appendix A).

This collateral was rolled out along with communication messaging on Facebook and Twitter to engage with the online community, placing paid advertising to target the at- risk populations. All video stories were captioned and the 3-minute videos were also translated with subtitles into 5 other prominent languages – Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Hindi and Thai. The video stories currently sit on the NSW SES You Tube channel. They were also uploaded onto a flash drive and distributed to more than 100 organisations, who work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities in NSW.

Local and national media helped contribute to the success of the project. Radio and print stories appeared in ABC Country Hour, Northern Star [<https://www.northernstar.com.au/news/half-metre-deep-flood-flowing-like-being-hit-byan/3158405/>], Maitland Courier and Town and Country Farmer.

During the campaign, the NSW SES Real People True Stories content was seen over 800,000 times, and videos were viewed more than 400,000 times. The campaign reached over 150,000 individual young men in NSW, and over half a million more people outside of the target group. Engagement with the campaign was also high, with 28,000 people liking, sharing, or commenting on the content with most comments being supportive of these people sharing their entering floodwater story.

The flood-safety campaigns videos and social media content is now stored on the NSW SES resource portal and available for use as required on social media. If there is a severe weather event, when flooding over roads and properties may happen, the NSW SES can use these online resources to affect awareness among the community. Peter's story delivers a powerful message to other farmers: if you have livestock plan ahead and prepare early- get them up on higher ground as soon as the weather warning is announced. Sonya's story highlights that even if the water on the road looks still and shallow, the road may have disappeared. Tom's story highlights how a poor decision can affect your hip pocket as well as your relationships. Jaime's story promotes making the decision that keeps you and your family safe by taking an alternative route.

These suite of video stories aim to target at-risk groups who are known to engage in the risk-taking behaviour of entering floodwater. They offer a platform to explore the decision-making process that precedes an individual entering floodwater and highlight the impacts of these decisions on real people's lives. Each story provides an opportunity to stimulate discussion about people's thought processes and accompanying behaviours to enable shared learnings of what happens when entering floodwater. The **Real People True Stories** videos provide both an understanding of how people can find themselves entering floodwater as well as strong messaging to reinforce better and safer decision making. It is hoped that this will follow on with individuals and communities exercising choice and taking responsibility for their actions. As a result of the success of these true stories, the NSW SES has developed two more true stories of people entering floodwater due to flash-flooding events in urban settings.

¹ Permission was sought and granted by Queensland Fire and Emergency Services to use this tagline

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