

**Radio in disaster situations**

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## France Bleu in close proximity to joys and sorrows

In 2003, the France Bleu network consolidated its position in France as a major radio channel, now visible in a national radio landscape in which, thanks to the Internet, the “web effect” has become a prime factor. Today, anyone listening to a local station, anywhere in France, can participate in real time in the life of their region while keeping a finger on the pulse of the wider world thanks to the ever-watchful journalists at the France Bleu network centre.

Everything is now everywhere on our airwaves: “local” and “global” combine into a sort of “*globcal*”, but without altering a single strand of the social bonding effect of the coverage of intensely local concerns which is still, more than ever, our *raison d'être*. This is a considerable asset vis-à-vis the competing general-interest channels, whose strictly national vocation often leads them to speak with the same voice.

### In close proximity

Thanks to this configuration, France Bleu finds itself closer to both the joys and sorrows of the regions of France, all the more so when disaster or tragedy strikes (floods, accidents, fires, natural catastrophes and so on).

This shows that it was essential that on the basis of a close collaboration with Civil Defence, the France Bleu stations should assert themselves as the country’s “crisis radio”.

This was the case in 1999, on the occasion of the terrible storm at the end of December, or again during the ecological catastrophes following the sinking of the *Erika* oil tanker in 2001 and the oil slick caused by the *Prestige* in January 2003. It was the case again, at 19.00 hours on 23 February 2004, when an earthquake caused a total black-out in Besançon, forcing the mayor to make his way across his own city to France Bleu’s studio in order to find out what was going on.

On each occasion, the stations of Radio France shone. The telephones were down. Only the radio was still working. The prefectures were snowed under and the official services submerged, but the reporters were everywhere on the job in the towns and villages facing difficulties, with the helpless listeners at home, tuned to one of the 43 stations. The transistor once again became an essential gateway to the rest of the world, making it possible to allocate assistance and donations to those affected by these disasters. The

France Bleu network clearly upholds the tradition of human solidarity.

In order to fully understand the essential function performed by the stations in the France Bleu network today, it is enough to listen to Gabriel Valdisseri who, under the aegis of Christiane Chadal, Radio France’s Delegate for the Mediterranean South region, guided the activities of the Nîmes station during the freak floods of autumn 2002.

This crisis radio accompaniment, stretching over more than three weeks, began with the first rainfall: “When the rain started,” Gabriel Valdisseri recalls, “the main Alès-Nîmes road had not been closed by the authorities. In fact, an hour later, more than 100 vehicles were trapped, with water half-way up the doors, at the roundabout of La Calmette, a small locality just before Nîmes. All the mobile phone calls from stranded people converged on France Bleu Gard Lozère. Those who weren’t too far away even found refuge there! Throughout the night, France Bleu’s team took it in turns on the air to provide company, reassurance and information on the resources being deployed to come to the aid of those stranded.

The mobile phones gradually ran down and fell silent. That night, over 1,500 people were immobilized on the roads of the Department of the Gard and in the midst of torrents of mud, their only lifeline with the

# Prophesies

## and radio

world was our coverage on their car radios.”

The increase in the number of natural or technological disasters, frequently with drastic consequences for the victims, has revealed the pressing need to develop the provision of information to the population by radio in the event of crisis situations. Radio, in fact, has an essential role to play in this area, both in relaying the instructions from the authorities on the behaviour to adopt before and during a crisis and informing and assisting the authorities and disaster victims in order to speed up a return to normal.

With this in mind, the Ministry of the Interior (Civil Defence and Security Directorate) decided to approach Radio France with a view to strengthening cooperation in this area.

*This approach corresponds to three goals:*

- further develop the dissemination of instructions for *preventive action to take and behaviour to adopt*;
- make it easier to set up *radio services for crisis management and public contact dedicated to all types of risk*;
- and create a real *partnership* between the prefects – at zone and department level – and Radio France.

The first significant measure was the conclusion of a nationwide

agreement laying down the conditions for a partnership between the Ministry of the Interior, Internal Security and Local Freedoms and Radio France.

In addition, an exchange of information took place on the location of the sites coming under a specific intervention plan and the coverage areas of Radio France’s transmitters.

Finally, the decision to jointly draft a guide for the relevant services in the prefectures and France Bleu’s local station heads constitutes a milestone in relations between the public authorities and the broadcasting services.

*This approach is aimed at reinforcing mutual cooperation which ought not to be confined to the crisis period alone, but should cover all situations:*

*- before the crisis:*

- ensure all actors and organizations know each other and each other’s working methods;
- improve the understanding of the complexity of decisions to be made in a crisis situation;
- educate and make the population aware of the instructions concerning prevention and conduct;
- carry out forecasting and planning work;
- ensure the presence of journalists at training exercises.

*- during the crisis:*

Radio France, through the intermediary of one of its stations, serves as a link between the authorities and the population. It relays the authorities’ instructions and carries out a general information remit.

*- after the crisis:*

The link established between the authorities and the population continues after the crisis with the aim of restoring a normal situation.

Radio has an important support role in accompanying the disaster victims in their various transactions, specifically their dealings with the administrative authorities, and allowing them to present their testimonies on the air.

Radio is also to be associated with the debriefings. The participation of radio crews at these sessions, not only as actors but also as witnesses, should help make these actions to safeguard the population even more effective.

Previous debriefings have shown, in particular, the need to set up crisis-dedicated radio channels or special programme sessions.

To be usefully and foreseeably available when the unforeseeable occurs, has been, and remains more than ever, radio’s central, rediscovered vocation.