Government communication strategies for community recovery following the ACT Bushfires, January 2003

Beckenham and Nicholls examine a unique episode in government-community recovery communication in the aftermath of the 2003 Canberra bushfires

Abstract

On 18 January, 2003, a bushfire that swept over the ACT was responsible for four deaths and destroyed large areas of rural and suburban ACT, including more than 500 homes and other buildings. From the evening of 18 January, the ACT Government undertook an extensive response and recovery effort. A major part of this was to establish, maintain and improve communication between the ACT Government and the affected community to support recovery needs. This project, focusing on the recovery phase following the bushfire, examines a unique episode in government-community communication. It attempts to describe and evaluate the effectiveness of the ACT Government's communication initiatives, and proposes a preliminary model for government-community recovery communication.

The scope of the event

On 18 January, 2003, the ACT experienced what was later described as 'an unprecedented fire disaster' (Report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, ACT October 2003, p. ix), causing the death of four people, the loss of 488 homes and some 90 community, commercial and rural buildings, and damage to many other homes and businesses, including rural properties to the west of Canberra (McLeod Report, 2003, p.iii).

As the report of the ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce later noted, practically all the bushland to the west and south of Canberra was burnt out, destroying about three quarters of the ACT pine plantations. There was severe fire damage to the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve and Namadgi National Park, including all of the Cotter River water catchment. There was also significant damage to electricity, gas, water, sewerage and telephone services in the ACT. At one stage immediately after the fire storm, there was no electricity supply to some 50,000 ACT residents, and many people were without power and telephone for a week or more. The two major water suppliers into Canberra were temporarily non-operational, as was the sewage treatment plant.

Aside from structural damage, there were three other aspects identified by the ACT Government as requiring attention in the recovery process. These were the 'hit and miss' nature of the destruction pattern in suburban Canberra where there was a patchwork of destroyed properties alongside 'saved', although often damaged properties; severe losses of livelihood, stock and infrastructure for many rural families already badly drought-affected; and finally, apart from some serious physical injuries, many people experienced severe emotional problems.

From the evening of 18 January, the ACT Government began an extensive and complex response and recovery effort. A major part of this was to foster, maintain and enhance communication between the ACT Government and the affected community to address recovery needs of the ACT community. The Government's intention was 'to provide up-to-date, relevant and useful information to assist with the recovery process', (speech by Alan

Properties to Canberra's west bore the brunt of the firestorm

Volunteers help to restore gardens

Thompson, Chief Executive, ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Secretariat, Emergency Management 2003 Conference, June 2003, Sydney). To this end, the ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce was set up on 24 January. On the same day, the ACT Bushfire Recovery Centre was established in premises at the Lyons Primary School in central Canberra. These two organisations played a major role in the wide range of communication activities conducted by the ACT Government in the months following the bushfire.

This article describes the organisational and management structure in relation to communication activities; the action plan devised and its implementation by elements of the structure; communication methods and vehicles; and the critical role played by the Community and Expert Reference Group and the ACT Bushfire Recovery Centre in terms of two-way communication. It gives an initial evaluation of recovery communication, and critiques the ACT Government's own evaluation of its efforts to communicate with the community in recovery. It seeks also to evaluate the effectiveness of the ACT authorities' response, and possibly to formulate a new theoretical proposition based on findings.

The project, begun in May 2003, spans the period from the establishment of the taskforce to the end of March 2004, when specific recovery activities ceased to operate out of the Recovery Centre, which closed. This article presents findings as at March 2004.

Literature review

Our research project began with the assumption that there would be a number of studies looking at disaster recovery communication. We proposed to compare what the ACT Government had done in its recovery communication with other practices.

The literature search undertaken indicates that there has been surprisingly little research into post-disaster recovery communication strategies or campaigns in Australia. Many studies looked at disaster and crisis communication needs both *before* (involving information about disaster preparedness) and *during* catastrophic events, as well as at re-establishing the infrastructure required for communication in the immediate aftermath of disaster (White 1997). There is considerable material written from the perspective of psychology, social psychology and cognitive theory. Some articles focus on affected individuals rather than on the community, such as work on disaster trauma.

There is also material examining risk communication looking at credibility issues in information on disaster preparedness.

One article on recovery information management (*Australian Journal of Emergency Management,* Vol 10, No 1, Autumn 1995, p.25) states that information management in disaster recovery is not only about providing the affected community with information about the availability of recovery services and plans, but is the basis for important social processes such as bonding between individuals, groups and communities. The article notes that the capacity of the community to participate in its own recovery is directly dependent

on communication of information. It presents ten information management principles that include:

- information needs to enhance the capacity of an affected community to manage its own recovery;
- information needs to be timely, factual and disseminated through a range of communication channels;
- information needs to be repeated frequently in the early stages following a disaster;
- information needs to change during the course of the recovery;
- information credibility is enhanced through delivery by a known credible person or organisation; and
- information management involves processes of gathering, processing and dissemination.

However, there appears to be a paucity of research in Australia into post-disaster recovery communication strategies and campaigns conducted by government authorities (at any level) to reach affected communities in the recovery phase following disaster, which is the focus of this research. The Victorian State Disaster Recovery Plan (*State Disaster Recovery Plan: Victoria* 1987) defines recovery in terms of a 'process by which a community is helped to return to its proper level of functioning after an emergency'. This publication was a response to the Ash Wednesday bushfires. It gives objectives and principles for recovery management, and goes on to say that recovery 'is an enabling and supportive process which allows individuals, families and communities to attain a proper level of functioning through the provision of information, specialist services and resources'. But there is no specific discussion of how government authorities should utilise communication channels to provide information.

Research framework

To establish the nature of recovery communication as employed by the ACT Government, a series of questions were devised relating not only to communication methods adopted, but also to the organisational structure and management developed to direct government-community communications.
The questions included:

- what communication channels, strategies and messages were utilised; and
- what kinds of response and feedback were sought and obtained from the affected community.

While responses to our questions provided material for a much larger research project than this article can cover, a significant finding was that the organisational

structure set up in the aftermath of the bushfire was crucial to the implementation of the government's communication strategy. The research focuses on this structure and its implications for communication.

Communication structure

The ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, answerable directly to the Chief Minister of the ACT, was set up within days of the bushfire. Headed by Sandy Hollway, former Canberra resident, senior Commonwealth public servant and CEO of the Sydney Organising Committee for the 2000 Olympic Games, it consisted of five other prominent Canberra people representing the ACT community sector, ACT business, the ACT Government and the directly fire-affected community. The Taskforce was informed by a Community and Expert Reference Group (CERG) of 15 people representing a wide range of interested and affected groups in the community, including business, professional and trade organisations, unions, community groups and local politicians.[1]

The Taskforce and CERG were served by a Secretariat consisting of six functional areas. One of the functional areas was the Communications and Community Relations Group (CCRG), which was responsible for the communication effort. CERG's advice was channelled through the Taskforce to the Secretariat for action. The Secretariat was also able to call on all other ACT departmental agencies for support, and drew staff from all areas of the ACT public service during the intensive period in the first months after the bushfire.

Taskforce Action Plan

The Taskforce prepared a detailed action plan in February 2003 that described the structure, functions and action schedule of each operational part of the recovery response, including its public communication plan. The *ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Action Plan* (ACT Government, 2003) stated the Taskforce's goals, naming key issues, planned activities, and their current

Sandy Hollway (centre) headed the CERG

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1 Members of the CERG included representatives from the Canberra Business Council, the Master Builders Association, Duffy Primary School Parents and Citizens Association, residents of Duffy and Chapman whose homes were destroyed, a rural lessee, the Weston Creek Community Council, the Institute of Architects, the ACT Division of the Planning Institute, Unions ACT, the Conservation Council and the ACT Council of Social Service.

status at the time of writing in February. In part it is against these aims that communication effectiveness is being assessed.

The operational responsibility for the CCRG was:

> Public information and media relations, co-ordination of intra-government communications for the Taskforce secretariat, management of the formal community business expert consultative process through the Community and Expert Reference Group. (*ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Action Plan,* February, ACT Government, 2003, p.4)

The communication group was further charged with a number of responsibilities tied to key issues identified in the action plan.[2] Central to these responsibilities was the provision of 'up to date, relevant and useful information to assist with the recovery process'. (ACT Government 2003 pp.8–12). This was elaborated in the action plan under three issues. Briefly, the group recognised that:

- access to information was not only the right of all Canberrans during the recovery process but also crucial to the community's capacity to recover;
- different groups within the community would require different types and amounts of information; and
- information requirements would change.

Community Update *was considered the most important communicaton vehicle*

Finally, they recognised that the Taskforce would need to identify what needed to be communicated, to whom and when, and 'to develop information gathering, processing and dissemination channels.' The communication strategy was 'to include a continuously updated set of questions and answers so as to ensure relevant and consistent advice to the media and the public on emerging issues' (ACT Government 2003 p.12).

In February 2003, under 'current status', the CCRG reported that:

> The aim is an effective (not necessarily elaborate, expansive or 'slick') communications strategy which gets necessary information in a timely way to stakeholders and to the community. This is therefore to be seen as an integral operational part of the recovery effort, not public relations for its own sake or a mechanism to put 'spin' on issues. The Taskforce will contribute to wider communications strategies to reinforce community morale, spirit and pride in the ACT's response to the fires and confidence in the future (ACT Government 2003 p.13).

To this end, the group took on a number of tasks to:

- establish communication channels to facilitate information transfer both to and from the community, and between the Taskforce, Secretariat and the CERG;
- produce regular community news bulletins covering both specific topics of concern and broader community information;
- provide regular briefing on identified and emerging issues to the Taskforce, Secretariat, CERG, the Government and the public service; and
- facilitate the transfer within government and to the public of necessary technical and operational advice.

Communication methods and vehicles

The ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, through the CCRG, used a number of channels of traditional media and a range of less conventional methods to convey the ACT Government's messages to the residents of Canberra and to receive feedback in the wake of the disaster. These included a weekly newsletter, radio announcements, regular advertisements in a number of ACT newspapers, a call centre, email and websites.

The weekly newsletter, *Community Update*, was delivered to all affected neighbourhoods, community centres, churches, and individuals and groups who asked to be on the mailing list. Copies were also available at the

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2 These included establishing 'direct links between the community and the Taskforce through mechanisms such as email links for community members to input issues and concerns'; ensuring 'the provision of clear information in relation to health and safety concerns and ways to manage possible risks'; ensuring 'a definitive statement about health matters to provide full and open advice to residents about risks and precautions'; providing practical information about the building system to enable people to choose whether to rebuild their homes or not; and ensuring 'that consumer protection issues are addressed through the involvement of the ACT authorities, the ACCC, the complaints mechanisms of the industry, and publication of trends in prices'.

Recovery Centre. The newsletter was available in both hard and soft (i.e. email) copy.

Newspaper advertisements included half-page advertisements in the Wednesday and Saturday editions of *The Canberra Times,* weekly full page advertisements in *The Chronicle* and fortnightly full page advertisements in the *Valley Voice* (both free local newspapers). Conventional public relations tools such as media releases, launches and events, news stories, and Community Billboard – a radio community announcement service – were also used.

CERG and the ACT Bushfire Recovery Centre

CERG and other key stakeholders met frequently with the Taskforce and members of the communications group. This provided regular feedback, contributing to knowledge of whether messages were received and understood, and indicated where messages needed to be adapted.

CERG proved to be a crucial organisational factor in the communication effort. This group was able to call on an extensive network of contacts, allowing a wide range of inputs and 'early warnings' to feed into the communication strategy and to steer and fine-tune the content of messages.[3]

As well as CERG's input, communication to and from the ACT community occurred daily on an informal basis via the Recovery Centre. Weekly meetings were held at the centre, which initiated a number of community activities in response to explicitly stated as well as perceived needs. These included organising short story and art competitions in schools, frequent meetings with affected residents, support for community barbecues and school sporting activities, and a Health Expo at a large shopping mall close to the fire-affected suburbs. The centre offered drop-in, and telephone and email enquiry facilities. It also hosted a series of public meetings at important time milestones, providing opportunities to hear and put questions to invited speakers with expertise in a number of areas, including recognised disaster trauma specialists.

Recovery Centre staff provided feedback from these encounters to the CCRG which then addressed newly realised communication needs with articles in *Community Update* and revised advertisement content. Recovery Centre management and staff had significant involvement in the commemorative event held on 18 January 2004 attended by approximately 3,000 people.

Rural villages and ACT farmers had special needs

Evaluating communication strategies

Our research looked at three forms of evaluation:

- focus group-based research commissioned by the ACT Government;
- narrative analysis of early community responses in letters to the editor in *The Canberra Times*; and
- the *Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Report,* published in October 2003.

To gauge support and demand for their recovery communication strategies and to assess their effectiveness for future government communication efforts, the Taskforce commissioned Market Attitude Research Services Pty Ltd (MARS) to run a series of focus groups in July 2003. Thirteen focus groups were conducted, comprising people whose houses were destroyed by the fires, people whose houses were damaged but still habitable, people living in fire-affected suburbs, and people from non-affected suburbs.

The MARS final report noted that, of all the communication strategies adopted by the Taskforce, participants were most unequivocal in their praise for the Recovery Centre. It was considered readily accessible, responsive, and rated highly by virtually all participants (Final Report: *Market Research to Evaluate Support for ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce Public Communications 11 July 2003,* 2003, Canberra).

Community Update was considered the most important and effective communication vehicle used by the Taskforce. Its format, presentation and community news style were highly rated. Content suggestions included more coverage of fire-affected areas outside the suburbs of Duffy and Chapman; and repeat articles on topics such as rebuilding issues, stress and depression indicators, and counselling, because the relevance of

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3 An example of CERG's input was its insistence that community concern regarding asbestos dust be dealt with. Although the ACT Health Department had assured the community that the risk was negligible, CERG reported high levels of anxiety about asbestos dust, so air measurement mechanisms were installed in affected suburbs which both proved public concern to be unjustified and demonstrated governmental willingness to listen to the community's fears.

such articles became apparent only some time after their original publication.

Taskforce advertisements in *The Canberra Times* and *The Chronicle* were also rated highly in terms of information, photographic content and graphic design. News articles about the recovery process in both newspapers were considered useful and deserving of continuing support.

The Canberra Connect telephone call centre was used heavily during the bushfires and highly rated, but was used less often in the recovery phase. The Canberra Connect recovery website was not well known and was infrequently used by participants from fire affected areas. It should be noted that participants also rarely used the soft copy *Community Update* (i.e. email) or the Recovery Centre email enquiry facility. The website and various other online information options were still considered useful resources as statistics gathered later by the Taskforce indicated the website was heavily accessed, particularly at the time of the fires and in the recovery period following (*Report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, Australian Capital Territory* October 2003, p.80).

Participants were generally unaware of the role of CERG in the Taskforce communication strategies. However, CERG's activities were crucially important in facilitating two-way communication between the affected community and the ACT Government, and the value of recognition by the public for the work it did is a matter for debate.

Following the MARS research, the ACT Government agreed to and acted on a number of recommendations, detailed in the Taskforce Report.

Community response in *The Canberra Times*

Focus groups are useful for specific, directed questioning—allowing topic specific feedback from specific groups. They are a quick, relatively cheap research method widely accepted by social researchers. They are, however, very obtrusive and prone to many of the shortcomings of bias. In particular, group dynamics and participants' reactive responses, both to the moderator and the focus of the questions, can bias the data gathered through this method.

To triangulate the focus group data, a preliminary narrative analysis of letters to the editor of *The Canberra Times* was conducted. The paper is the regional daily broadsheet, and its correspondents are primarily from the Canberra region. Its letters page thus offered a geographically specific research population that included the same demographic groups as the MARS research.

Analysis has to date been conducted on letters about the fires and their aftermath from the period 20 January

Photo by The Canberra Times

Katy Gallagher MLA (l), member of the ACT Legislative Assembly with staff of the ACT Recovery Centre

2003 to 23 February 2003. References to government activities, agencies and communication channels during the recovery phase of the disaster were specifically noted and categorised as positive or negative in tone. During the period examined there were 203 letters about the fires.

There were few specific references to the communication methods and vehicles utilised by the Taskforce. Nine letters commented on media coverage, three of these published in the first week after the fire; two praising the local ABC radio coverage, and one thanking the staff of *The Canberra Times*. Given their proximity to the disaster event it may be concluded that these writers were referring to communication during the disaster rather than the Taskforce's recovery communication channels. A letter on January 26 was highly critical of the lack of coverage on Fox/Skytel television. The next specific reference to media channels occurred on January 31; two writers praising *The Canberra Times* coverage, and one specifically mentioning their web site. *The Canberra Times* coverage was praised again on February 6, and commercial local radio (2CA and 2CC) were praised by one writer on February 5. Although 'coverage' is a very broad term, the positive comments made by correspondents tend to support the focus group findings that Taskforce communication via *The Canberra Times* was rated highly.

There were two specific references to call centres, the first on January 24, praising operators at the police and evacuation centre enquiry lines, and another on January 29 praising volunteers at call centres. Another correspondent on February 1 thanked 'all involved' including those who were 'informing the community' and several writers thanked 'service organisations', 'behind the scenes workers', 'volunteers' and 'those behind the front line'. While these generic descriptions do not offer the same level of specificity as the focus group data, they do suggest a general view that ongoing recovery activities were perceived as useful and valuable.

A striking aspect of the correspondence analysed was the number of positive references to the ACT Chief Minister, Jon Stanhope. He was specifically

mentioned by 12 correspondents, always in glowing terms being praised for exemplary leadership and behaviour and being compared by one correspondent to Mayor Guiliani of New York. No correspondence was critical of his performance. It is reasonable to assume that the expressed satisfaction with Jon Stanhope indicates a level of satisfaction with the performance of government as well.

Further work is required to analyse community responses to government communication initiatives, especially in relation to electronic media. However, our survey of initial responses tends to support the MARS focus group findings.

Taskforce Report

In October 2003, the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce published a substantial report on the entire recovery effort. Chapter ten of this report deals with the communication strategy, showing how it evolved, how community feedback produced changes in media use, emphasis or content of messages, and provides an assessment of overall effectiveness.

While it would be unrealistic to expect a government report describing its own activities to be particularly self-critical, the report does provide some valuable insights into the lessons learnt.

The report notes that more comprehensive and timely information was needed by the community, particularly in the early phase of recovery, through as many different channels as possible. Information should not only give details about the situation but should also tell people what is being done to assist them. In addition, the need to repeat information in newspaper articles and advertisements was recognised as important.

The report also summarises findings from the MARS research, and outlines plans to use the 'heightened level of awareness' in the community and the 'high level of knowledge' in the government to plan future responses (*Report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, Australian Capital Territory* October 2003, p.82). One result of this is the development of a new public information sub-plan for inclusion in an updated *ACT Emergency Management Plan.* The original plan contained minimal content regarding communication between affected communities and government emergency authorities, a flaw shared by many emergency management plans.

The report notes that an effective communication strategy in the recovery phase requires substantial resources, but that networks and resources activated during the emergency response can continue to be used in recovery.

Concluding, the report states: 'The need for community information before, during and after any emergency should never be underestimated. … During the recovery phase a comprehensive communication strategy … is essential.' (*Report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, Australian Capital Territory* October 2003, p.83).

Conclusion

From this preliminary research, it appears that the ACT Government's communication campaign in the recovery following the bushfire was very successful in most respects. In addition to using the mainstream media vehicles for getting messages across – including media releases, public meetings, events, community announcements, community newsletter, electronic/ digital information provision etc – the Taskforce also developed organisational structures, namely CERG and the Recovery Centre that were highly conducive to collecting responses from the affected community. This information was fed into the communication campaign, keeping communication up to date, relevant and specific to identified needs. Communication needs expressed during the focus group research, such as repetition of information, were addressed.

There is evidence from the focus group results that particular groups within the fire affected community, for example, residents of ACT rural villages and ACT farmers, felt they were not properly recognised in the Government's communication efforts. They felt they were a discrete group with differing communication needs and these needs were not met. In addition to rural communities, there were also a number of suburbs other than Duffy and Chapman where houses and property were destroyed or severely damaged. Some residents of these suburbs felt that Government messages were focused entirely on Duffy and Chapman and not directed to them.

However, as a model for post-disaster recovery communication between a government and its community, our research suggests that the ACT Government's response may serve as a best-practice model. In particular, the entire administrative structure set up in the immediate aftermath of the disaster laid the ground rules for highly effective two-way communication. This structure was innovative and broad-based, using established social and business networks as well as person-to-person communication through the Recovery Centre. In addition, community feedback received through this structure was acted on swiftly in the classical methods of issues management. To illustrate this process, we have developed a diagrammatic model of this communication structure (see following page) incorporating the main communication mechanisms and showing how two-way communication was fostered and acted on during the recovery period. This model shows how, following disaster, structures can be established to mediate communication between a government and its community, to operate in a two-way symmetrical feedback system (Grunig 1992) allowing messages to be

A RECOVERY COMMUNICATION MODEL

Diagram: Leanne Glenny, University of Canberra
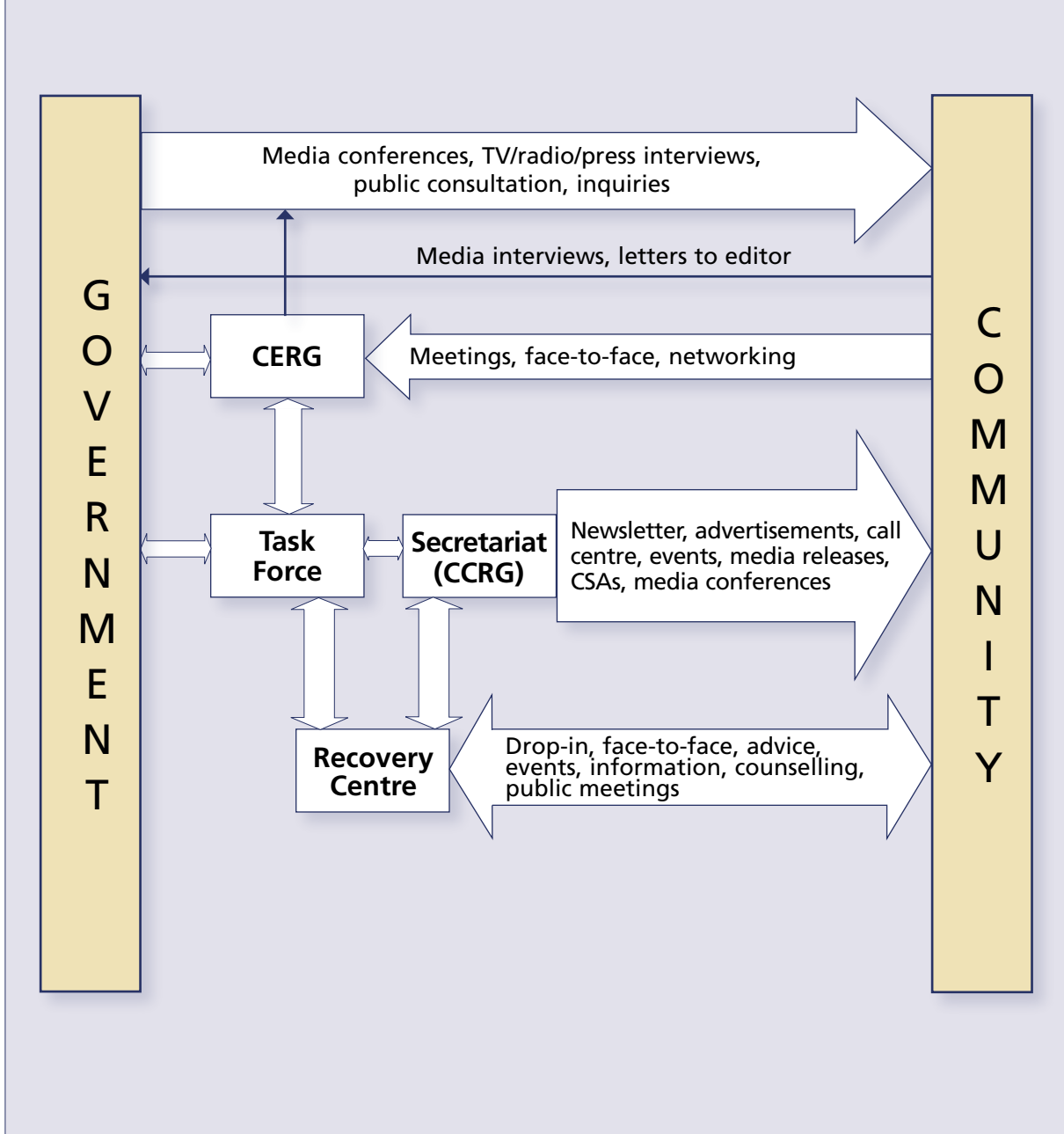
adapted and government activities modified or changed according to community response.

Ongoing research directions

Further analysis of *Community Update,* and also how the electronic media served the aims of the government's communication strategy during recovery, will be a focus of ongoing research into recovery communication in the ACT. As well, the response of the ACT community to the scaling down of the government's recovery initiatives requires analysis. Such an assessment may further indicate to what extent, if any, government

communication activities play a part in the community's resilience and capacity to 'move on'.

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