



## **GWTC<sup>1</sup> On The Importance Of Commercial Radio To Public Safety**

The public safety community has a variety of ways in which it communicates with the traveling public during emergencies. Examples include the highway roadside and overhead warning signs touting accidents, work zones or Amber alerts, Reverse 911 calls, as well as the Wireless Emergency Alert (“WEA”) system to send e-mails and text messages to your mobile device.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the increase in mass communication options, the backbone of real time public safety communications to the traveling public is Commercial broadcast radio. Whether through the FCC mandated Emergency Alert System,<sup>3</sup> the Travelers Information System (“TIS”),<sup>4</sup> or simply the broadcast of alerts by individual stations, the fastest, most efficient and most timely notification system remains Commercial radio.

Everyone is familiar with the Emergency Alert System (“EAS”) and its weekly test warning you “... had this been an actual emergency.” However, few are aware of the multiple of public safety uses of the system. While EAS is available to the President to communicate to the public in times of emergency, it is also used by state and local authorities for weather alerts, Amber alerts and similar emergencies.<sup>5</sup> Between 1976 and 1996, for example, the system was activated over 20,000 times.<sup>6</sup> Since

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<sup>1</sup> GWTC is a non-profit trade association created to advocate on behalf of government and non-government users of wireless technology and communications in the public service industries, such as public transit. More information is available here: [www.gwtca.org](http://www.gwtca.org).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/wireless-emergency-alerts-wea>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/general/emergency-alert-system-eas-0>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/media/radio/travelers-information-stations-search>.

<sup>5</sup> The next nationwide test is scheduled for August 7, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergency\\_Broadcast\\_System](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergency_Broadcast_System).



the updated Wireless Emergency Alerts (“WEA”) was launched in 2012, the system has been used more than 40,000 times.<sup>7</sup>

The Travelers’ Information Service (“TIS”, also called Highway Advisory Radio) is licensed to Government entities and Park districts. Some TIS stations operate in the AM Broadcast Band, with a coverage radius of 3 km.<sup>8</sup> However, State and Local Governments can create state-wide networks to provide services using Low Power FM stations.

The growth of satellite radio, streaming services and personal entertainment services may seem to have usurped the role of Commercial FM broadcast radio for distribution of emergency information, but perception can be misleading. Commercial FM remains a vital broadcasting service, and because of its local (not national) focus continues to be an important tool in the dissemination of information from governmental entities to the public in times of emergency.

The focus here is on FM, instead of AM, for several reasons. While the Delaware Department of Transportation relies on an AM TIS system,<sup>9</sup> the reality is that AM listenership is heavily declining.<sup>10</sup> Further, the problem of mitigating AM interference in electric cars (resulting, for example, in the Tesla X not coming with an AM Radio) will further hurt AM listenership as such vehicles proliferate.<sup>11</sup> Coupled with FM radio chip availability in cell phones, the reliance on FM broadcasting is much more important for public safety.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/wireless-emergency-alerts-wea>.

<sup>8</sup> For example, there are 75 TIS stations in the State of Texas.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.radioworld.com/news-and-business/deldot-tis>.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.insideradio.com/who-s-listening-am-radio-by-the-numbers/article\\_a65caa4a-54b6-11e7-b58d-df9c58fd262d.html](http://www.insideradio.com/who-s-listening-am-radio-by-the-numbers/article_a65caa4a-54b6-11e7-b58d-df9c58fd262d.html).

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yp3vmj/why-electric-cars-are-ditching-am-radio](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yp3vmj/why-electric-cars-are-ditching-am-radio).

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/28/16379316/fcc-iphone-fm-radio-activation-request-ajit-pai>.



Lisa M. Fowlkes, Chief of the Federal Communications Commission’s Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, said that “[b]roadcasters are the backbone of the Emergency Alert System and often the first source of detailed news about severe weather, missing children, and other dangerous situations. In addition, some small and minority-owned broadcasters are a primary source of information for non-English speakers in their communities. When disaster strikes, the public relies upon their local TV and radio stations to stay informed, find resources, and keep safe.”<sup>13</sup>

The importance of commercial radio for emergency alerting was highlighted in a recent Arizona Republic story, reprinted by USA Today, on the 2018 massive California fire, known as the “Camp Fire.” In that story, the authors noted the lack of a siren warning system in the City of Paradise, and that reverse 911 calls were delayed because of cellular system congestion. On a national basis, the story revealed that of the 413 counties mapped by the Republic with regard to fire danger, only 215 have been authorized by the FCC to communicate with cellphones in a targeted area. Butte County, where Paradise is located, had enrolled in the FCC program, but it had never been tested.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the most important tool for residents for obtaining information in the area during that disaster was commercial radio.

Much of commercial radio listening occurs in vehicles. Current studies show that when people are in their cars, AM/FM Radio is the overwhelmingly dominant audio companion, even among people who drive the newest cars, with broadcast radio consuming 67% of car listening. The “connected car” has not abated the public’s broadcast listenership of commercial radio (and FM in particular).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/blog/2019/05/20/attention-broadcasters-best-practices-broadcaster-reliability-and>.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2019/07/22/wildfire-risks-more-than-500-spots-have-greater-hazard-than-paradise/1801629001/>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://nabpilot.org/the-connected-car-and-its-impact-on-radio-listening/>



While there has been a rise in alternative entertainment sources in the vehicle, that growth has come at the expense of CD players, not broadcasters.<sup>16</sup> As stated by Quartz, “Radio survived the tape, CD, and iPod. In the age of Spotify, it’s more popular than ever.”<sup>17</sup> In some cases, FM chip-enabled smartphones has helped to keep FM’s popularity high.<sup>18</sup> In fact, commercial radio listenership in 2019 has actually risen over 2018.<sup>19</sup>

According to The Nielsen Company, the broadcast industry’s leading research organization, “radio remains the preferred choice for listening in the car,” with an astounding 71% of adult radio listening during weekday drive times happening in the car.<sup>20</sup> While some might believe that listenership would be significantly different with different generations (with younger generations listening less), listenership amongst generations is remarkably similar. Specifically, 98% of Baby Boomers are reached monthly by radio, but 95% of Millennials were also reached.<sup>21</sup>

One of the best examples of the value of commercial FM broadcasting was the wrath of Hurricane Isaac in 2012. With houses powerless for five days (and the resultant lack of access to television) and cell phone service knocked out, residents turned to FM radio for their emergency communications.<sup>22</sup>

While we are well beyond Orson Welles’ “War Of The Worlds” radio scare of 1938, the fact is that the public still relies on radio broadcasts for emergency information. This can be readily

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.edisonresearch.com/am-fm-radio-still-dominant-audio-in-car>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://qz.com/1094963/radio-survived-the-tape-cd-and-ipod-in-the-age-of-spotify-its-more-popular-than-ever/>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.rab.com/whyradio/mfdetailsUpdate-pr.cfm?theCat=Radio&section=pr>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/272m-americans-listen-to-the-radio-each-week-7m-more-than-in-2016/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nielsen National Regional Database, Fall 2018, Adults 18+, Audio Diary markets only.

<sup>21</sup> <https://newsgeneration.com/broadcast-resources/radio-facts-and-figures/>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevepociask/2018/04/23/smartphone-fm-radio-capabilities-enhance-public-safety-at-no-cost/#1fd49f0473a5>.



demonstrated by the errors that have occasionally occurred in the use of the system, such as the recent “radiological hazard warning” that recently occurred in Georgia, causing warnings to go over the radio.<sup>23</sup> A similar error recently sent an inadvertent EAS signal over WTOP’s airwaves in the Washington, D.C. area.<sup>24</sup>

When disaster strikes, people turn on their radios. And, even when the public is not aware of an emergency situation, the continued popularity of Commercial FM radio ensures that emergency communications to the traveling public reaches the greatest number of people possible. In sum, radio remains the “go-to” source in weather events and emergencies.<sup>25</sup> The Wireless Emergency Alert system is increasingly utilized to provide information to the public, clearly evidencing that a strong commercial broadcast radio system remains a vital tool for public safety officials in their efforts to ensure the safety of the public for now, and into the future.

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<sup>23</sup> <https://wtop.com/national/2019/06/radiological-hazard-warning-sent-in-error-sparks-confusion/>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.allaccess.com/net-news/archive/story/186946/inadvertent-eas-signal-from-wtop-washington-d-c-se>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.rab.com/whyradio/mfdetailsUpdate-pr.cfm?theCat=Radio&section=pr>.