

# Some communities are already doing the heavy lifting. What can we learn from them?



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## From whisper networks to communication infrastructure: How communities build their own disaster communication systems

In some communities, disasters trigger the emergence of sophisticated communication infrastructure – layered technologies, rapidly formed trust networks and information intermediaries who manage community-wide information flows. Drawing on 19 interviews across three major Australian disasters, this research asks what emergency management can learn from communities that build these systems from the ground up.

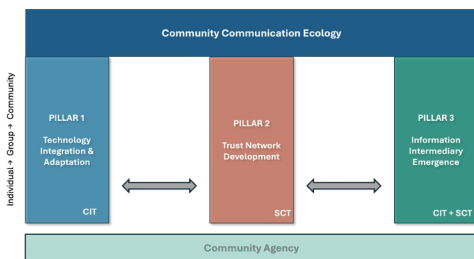
### The problem with transmission thinking

Australian emergency management operates on a transmission model: authorities craft messages and distribute warnings through designated channels, expecting communities to receive and act on them.

This model shapes policy, resource allocation and institutional design. Yet some communities develop remarkable communication capacity from the ground up – and what they build offers important lessons for practice.

This research examined how people across five communities in three disaster regions actually communicated during recent major disasters, revealing what transmission-based frameworks don't yet fully account for.

### Three-pillar framework diagram



### What communities actually build

In each disaster region, some community members constructed their own communication infrastructure – systematically, and often under extreme pressure. Three interconnected processes drove this:

**Technology integration:** Layered systems combining mobile phones, UHF radio, social media and face-to-face networks – with redundancy built in when one channel fails.

**Trust network development:** Trust, not authority, determines where people turn for information. Community volunteers and local contacts feature prominently in participants' networks alongside official sources.

**Information intermediaries:** Individuals who don't just share information but actively design and manage communication flows for their whole communities – transforming from system users into the infrastructure itself.

*"We became that, you know, trusted bank – people would come to us and say, 'Hey, this happening, what should I do here?' and we knew where to refer people through." – Margaret, Brisbane floods*

### What this means for practice

Where this capacity exists, it is often unrecognised and unsupported. These findings point to practical opportunities for emergency management agencies to identify, learn from and strengthen what communities are already doing well.

**Recognise existing capability.** Community communication systems are already operating. Identifying them is the foundation for more effective partnership.

**Support without controlling.** Connecting community infrastructure to formal systems can improve sustainability – while preserving the trust and flexibility that make it work.

**Invest in information intermediaries.** These individuals play a critical coordination role. Supporting them without imposing formal structures that undermine their community standing is a practical and high-value opportunity.

**Address uneven capacity.** The goal is understanding what enables some communities to build this capacity and using those insights to support communities that haven't yet had the conditions to develop it.

