



Emergency Alert System (EAS) Over Broadband

Proactively taking Homeland Security to the growing online community

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Have you ever found yourself watching a television program or listening to your favorite radio station when all of the sudden a message comes through, “This is a test of the emergency broadcast system ... this is only a test...” What is strange but true, the FCC actually requires by law that all broadcasters retransmit these signals as an important means of allowing the United States government to quickly and reliably communicate with citizens. While the scope of EAS is expanding (e.g. Amber Alerts), the one area it has not yet touched on is broadband. In this article we will explore the future of EAS over broadband—a hybrid EAS system that will not only traverse radio, television, and cable but, yes, also broadband Internet services.

EAS and FCC Compliance

EAS is principally designed to provide the President of the United States with the resources to communicate immediately with the American public in the event of a national emergency. EAS compliance has become increasingly important in light of the FCC’s recent creation of the Homeland Security Policy Council. Under this policy, cable operators are required to carry the Presidential EAS message to their subscribers. They also are encouraged to employ their EAS equipment to disseminate information in cases of state and local emergencies.

The FCC requires radio stations, television stations, and cable operators to comply with very strict re-broadcasting requirements of all “official” government communications. These

regulations are not to be taken lightly—fines start at \$8,000 per instance if the EAS equipment is not working properly. Such a fine is actually more than the cost of purchasing new EAS equipment. Depending on how large an operator you are, this cost may be somewhat of a hardship.

Growth of Internet Use over Television and Radio

Radio was the lifeline for Americans in the 1940’s, providing news, music and entertainment, much like television today. Programming included soap operas, quiz shows, children’s hours, mystery stories, fine drama, and sports. The government relied heavily on radio for propaganda and official communications with the American public. As the growth of television surpassed the listenership of radio, the government began to turn its focus on this media as another means of communicating

spent online, listening to the radio, and watching TV (source: Harris Interactive July 2003). While this percentage continues to increase, people who regularly go online can only obtain emergency information if they visit appropriate informational websites. With no other alternative, the combination of radio and television are no better than 61% effective at reaching the American public—an increasingly alarming figure to the FCC and one that is only expected to decline over time.

EAS over Broadband: Just a Matter of Time

Today, government has an increasing online presence and has dropped hints about a national Internet Monitoring System initiative geared towards keeping tabs on what information is flowing around the nation’s Internet. The government’s interest in effectively wiretapping the nation’s Internet is

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with its citizens. EAS came into being and radio and television are currently its primary delivery mechanisms.

Today, another transition is taking place as younger people’s Internet use represent 39% of their combined time

only part of their challenge. The other challenge is how it will communicate with the growing number of online people when clearly they are not watching television or listening to the radio. The only answer seems to be, EAS over

