

New Amber Alerts earning some bad reviews



By [Dan Brown](#), The London Free Press
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A revamped Amber Alert warning system, used to help locate missing children believed to be in danger, has been used twice in Ontario, the last time 10 days ago.

But not everyone is happy with the methods.

The enhanced alert system appears as a glaring red box over top of broadcasts, the first use of which last month triggered complaints on social media and saw some viewers call 911 to complain.

"The overall impression is that I should be dropping everything and heading for the bomb shelter," said Toronto lawyer Paul McKeever, who takes exception to the blaring messages. "It's intentionally designed not merely to inform the viewer, but to emotionally jolt them into distress and concern."

Ontario's Amber Alert is a voluntary co-operative between the Ontario Association of Broadcasters, police and the province's Transportation Ministry.

It uses highway message signs, radio, TV, cable, satellite and other providers to rapidly transmit descriptions of kidnap victims, suspected abductors and their vehicles.

Broadcasters are required by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission to break into programming with the alerts.

The OPP last week acknowledged the social media complaints about the alerts. A "disappointed" Insp. Pat Morris issued a statement apologizing for any inconvenience, but added, "We won't apologize for using all of the tools available to us to find a missing child."

Morris was backed by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne.

Until late March, the alerts would appear as a banner superimposed over programming, but wouldn't bring a show to a stop.

McKeever, an employment lawyer who leads the Marc Emery-founded Ontario Freedom Party, says he'd be fine with alerts that appear as scrolling banners. But he objects to viewers being denied programming they've paid cable companies for.

"If the viewer is watching a program that he or she has previously paused . . . the Amber Alert erases the cached content. When the Amber Alert is over, one gets only the real-time feed," he said.

And he doesn't buy the argument the new alerts are a small price to pay for perhaps saving a life, saying they often involve child-custody disputes between parents.

"These abductions — of a biological child by a non-custodial biological parent — are very common, and rarely involve a real risk of harm to anyone," he said.

McKeever believes law-enforcement agencies are "showing no sense of proportion when they treat a parent's abduction of a beloved biological child the same way they would treat a Paul Bernardo situation."

"And, they're doing us a disservice, because they are essentially crying wolf and desensitizing us to important alerts," he added.

With files by Canadian Press

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