

Natural hazards and the press in the West Mediterranean Region

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When studying the social impact of natural hazards it is important to have information from as most documentary and objective sources as possible. One of these sources is the media. This contribution aims to analyze the social impact of natural risks in the west Mediterranean region (Catalonia) by using newspapers articles and meteorological data. More than 2,500 press news published during the period 1982-2005 have been analyzed for this purpose. These news have been entered in an ACCESS database with more than 10 fields covering headlines, key words, type of risk, place of event, newspaper name, date of event and date of publishing, page, etc. This database allows different analysis, like the quantitative evaluation of the impact of each risk or the progress of the treatment by the press of each type of risk over the study period.

Results obtained show that the common perception of natural hazards in the region does not coincide with their frequency neither with their impact in newspapers. Although people consider that natural risks are not important in the region, more than 1,500 news about them have been published between 1982 and 2005. In the same line, in despite of the perception that Mediterranean climate is essentially arid, floods arise to number one with 678 headlines, followed by agrometeorological hazards (drought events, hail, forest fires and frost events) with 500 headlines. Snowfalls, snow avalanches and cold waves have given 268 headlines, while only 95 news covered windstorms. The statistics have shown that flash floods are the natural hazards that have the most dramatic impact on society in the west Mediterranean region. However, if we would analyze the ratio “number of articles/event”, we could see that agrometeorological hazards and snowfalls have received the major news coverage, with a 5.5 headlines/event and 5.7 headlines/event, respectively, while this figure is 4.4 for flood events. In this type of study it is necessary to bear in mind all the factors that played a role when writing the piece of news and assigning it a space in the newspaper. The influence of the season of the year (i.e. less “interesting” news during summer), the extension of the event, the proximity to the capital and the political situation are crucial in this distribution. Consequently, the results must be treated with great care in this respect. These data were compared to the amount of the compensations paid for damages by the insurance companies. The comparison with meteorological data

shows that it is difficult to establish a relationship between event magnitude and social impact and perception.