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‘Firestorm’, beyond the attraction for devastation: Context, scientific information and emotion to shape a compelling multimedia story

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Abstract

The framing of environmental issues performs a leading role in understanding the dimension and ways to respond to natural and man-made disasters (Pantti, 2019), mainly linked to global warming. Research revealed the trend of turning them into a “media spectacle” (Schröder, 2010, 190), focusing on the catastrophe and the “visual pleasure that makes it possible to enjoy the disaster as a spectacle” (Nusser, 2015, 129). This paper analyses the multimedia Firestorm, launched by The Guardian in 2013, to reconstruct how a family faced one of the bushfires which occurred in Tasmania, Australia, in 2013. This case study delves into the journalists role as “moral story-tellers” in “interpreting disasters, their causes, and their effects, as well as in facilitating adequate responses” (Pantti, 2019). Firestorm is an nonfiction visual storytelling that allows an immersive reading experience (Dowling & Vogan, 2015). Using a qualitative methodology, this research answers these RQ: How is the human story embedded in the broader context of the history of bushfires in Tasmania and global climate change?; Is this production in tune with scientific efforts to prevent and extinguish wildfires? Preliminary conclusions show that Firestorm makes use of audio, video, writing, photography and maps to produce a compelling story. Taking the iconic smartphone pictures by a Tasmanian grandfather who escaped from fire, Firestorm balances personal and contextual information. It benefits from the involvement of citizens in making more human and accessible environmental disasters (Pantti, 2019). Unlike other media coverage, it is beyond the narratives purely centered on destruction. It relies on the role of emotion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013), linked to a scientific and technical explanation on how climate change fueled forest fires. The multimedia also opens the debate about the mismatch between the nowadays life and the flammable environment.

Keywords: environment, wildfire, media spectacle, multimedia storytelling, Firestorm

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