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Improving Wildfire TV Coverage: Lessons from a Spanish summer (2021)

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Abstract

This paper studies TV coverage of wildfires in Spain. The research contributes to previous studies on wildfire media coverage (e.g. Fabra-Crespo & Rojas-Briales, 2015; Karyotakis, 2021; Morehouse & Sonnett, 2010), and on public framing on the issue (e.g. Castelló & Montagut, 2019; Seijo, 2009). The aim was to identify salient topics in the stories and innovative ways of reporting. The research focused on two public channels (TVE/TV3) and covered one month (15th July to 15th August). The corpus was selected using the search engine of the corporations' online platforms. The search terms were 'incendio'/'incendi' and the corpus (59 pieces, 101 min and 14 sec) only included reports on Spanish cases. The study applied a textual analysis that recorded the aspects highlighted in the reports. The results reveal that recurrent aspects are the cause of the fires, the extent of the fire damage, the direction of the fire and the weather conditions, the evacuation of people, and the firefighting equipment. Secondary issues were the natural value of the area, the height of the flames and smoke columns, and material losses. Common images were of the burning forest, air support and the damaged areas. Some of the footage was provided by institutions (importantly for the Catalan case by the Firefighters of Catalonia [Bombers de Catalunya]). The research shows that short reporting consistently follows a pattern of topics and images. However, it also detected innovative ways to supplement these reports on the extinction of the fires, especially on the Catalan public channel. These were more explanatory pieces focusing on such aspects as wood management, forest property or rural investment as long-term causes of the fires. Despite the little time dedicated to it and the TV format, wildfire coverage is increasing more reflective perspectives and broader approaches to fire suppression and prevention, which now is including such aspects as forest management, environmental policies and property structure. The author suggests that quality journalism should pay attention to aspects of fire prevention before and after fire seasons and this trend of improvement, especially detected for the Catalan public television, should be reinforced soon in wildfire coverage and reporting. Stressing on previous recommendations for journalists (Ballart et al., 2016; Plana, 2011), it is also suggested that the media should make greater effort to deseasonalize news production on wildfire management and prevention.

Keywords: wildfire reporting, crisis reporting, risk communication, wildfire journalism

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