

Going beyond communicating about risk: Learning from community-led wildfire initiatives

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Abstract

In present times of Global Change, there are increasingly extreme wildfires despite fire suppression efforts, entailing disaster and socioenvironmental injustices. In response, there is a need for alternative approaches to address and engage with wildfires. But not only that: it is time to critically review present risk communication practices, and question whether the ways we communicate about wildfires are still up to current challenges. This is particularly urgent for rural communities, who are often impacted first and hardest by wildfires.

Now, the Wildfire Suppression Paradigm has - up to date - greatly informed the field of Wildfire Risk Communication. That is, by taking an approach that is predominantly focused on the risk dimension of wildfires, whereby generic, expert-driven messages are conveyed towards the public, to nudge these towards certain risk reduction behaviours. Yet, given the increasing impacts of extreme wildfires on our socioenvironmental systems, such a communicative approach has shown to be limited. Not only in preventing and mitigating wildfires, but also in addressing the underlying causes of disaster, and by excluding the voices and knowledges of many, such as those who have for generations lived with fire in rural areas.

Therefore, we need to go beyond focusing only on wildfire risk, and instead recognise wildfires as inherently part of our socioecological systems, and long-term, complex processes that occasionally become visible through flame and smoke. This calls for taking more inclusive, locally embedded, and participatory approaches to communicating about wildfires. Through my research with a community-led wildfire initiative - Pego Viu in SE Spain - we can learn about communicating in such ways. By responding to local needs and interests, acknowledging people's knowledges and experiences, and collaboratively co-constructing ways forward, these initiatives address critical aspects often overlooked in conventional Wildfire Risk Communication practices. To finalise, we conclude that it is only by truly engaging and communicating with communities that we will be able to face the challenges of our times.

Keywords: Risk Communication, Community-Led Communication, Wildfire Communication, Local and Rural Knowledges, Community Engagement.