



COVERING WILDFIRES

MEDIA EMPHASIS AND SILENCE

RESEARCH BRIEF 20 • SUMMER 2019

Media coverage can play an important role in framing natural disasters and influencing public understanding of disaster events and disaster management. How wildfire events are covered can affect public awareness and opinion of specific wildfires. Media coverage can also affect public perception of different aspects of wildfires and wildfire activity in general, and thus influence public support for different aspects of wildfire management.

In this study, researchers examined print media coverage, data of burned homes, and demographic data of towns impacted by two major wildfires in Washington State. The Carlton Complex burned over 250,000 acres and hundreds of homes in the Methow Valley in 2014, becoming the largest wildfire in Washington's history. In 2015, the fires that made up the Okanogan Complex burned over 300,000 acres in the same part of northcentral Washington, destroying hundreds more structures and resulting in three firefighter fatalities. Researchers investigated the topics that were prominent and that were ignored in the media coverage of these two wildfires. In particular, they examined media coverage related to wildfire risk and firefighter safety, and compared the locations focused on in the media coverage of the fires in relation to the locations with the greatest damage from the fires.



KEY FINDINGS

- Media coverage of the fires failed to contextualize discussions of firefighter safety.
- Media coverage generally ignored salient issues of climate change, socioeconomic inequality, and wildfire risk and prevention measures.
- Media coverage did not always focus on locations of greatest impact or quote non-elite stakeholders.

The Northwest Fire Science Consortium is a regional fire science delivery system for disseminating knowledge and tools, and a venue for increasing researcher understanding of the needs of practitioners.



RESULTS

Media content

There were three firefighter fatalities on the first day of the Okanogan Complex, and firefighter safety was mentioned more in the coverage of the Okanogan Complex than the Carlton Complex. However, only 26 percent of newspaper articles for that fire included some mention of firefighter safety beyond only stating that there were firefighter fatalities or injuries. No article for either fire mentioned wildfire prevention as it related to risk for firefighters, and firefighter risk, when it was mentioned, was in every instance described as part of the job and something out of the control of firefighters. Only 1.4% of articles mentioned prevention related to public or wildfire safety.

The large majority of the media coverage of the fires also did not include contextual information about issues such as climate change, wildfire risk reduction, or social inequalities that might influence resilience to wildfire risk. The only theme mentioned in a clear majority of articles for both fires was public or residential safety. Ecological impacts of the fires received far less attention in the coverage than impacts to human and social systems. Although wildfires are more likely to negatively affect low-income or other marginalized populations, mentions or discussions of inequality of wildfire impacts were virtually absent in the newspaper coverage. Most quotes in the coverage came from people in positions of authority, with infrequent quotes from firefighters or affected residents.

Locations in the media coverage

Media coverage of the Carlton and Okanogan Complexes did not focus on the geographic locations with the greatest losses. Although most newspaper articles mentioned at least one town in Washington state, most (60 percent) did not name any locations where homes burned. Some towns with the greatest losses were mentioned in few to no newspaper articles, while other towns with fewer impacts from the fire received more coverage. These discrepancies may be due in some part to the location of the fires' Incident Command Posts (ICPs), where reporters received official briefings; the ICP towns were mentioned slightly more often in the newspaper articles for their relevant fires, though this alone did not account for discrepancies. There are differences in sociodemographic characteristics between towns that were over-represented and under-represented in the media. Over-represented towns were more tourist-focused, had fewer agricultural jobs, and had higher median housing values. Under-represented towns tended to have higher Latino populations, lower median income, higher poverty, more renter-occupied housing units, and more mobile homes than the county average.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Not all media coverage should be expected to provide complex and nuanced discussion of contextual information. However, consistent and ongoing textual silences in the coverage in regards to issues like climate change and inequalities of impact matter because media coverage influences public understanding of disasters and disaster management. Coverage of firefighter safety that normalizes or sensationalizes the risk to firefighters may contribute to public understanding of firefighter fatalities as "part of the job." Coverage that does not include discussion of social or ecological contexts that can improve safety may also downplay the importance of risk management actions that can make fires safer, both for firefighters and the public.

Journalists and media spokespeople can use information about inequalities in the media coverage of wildfires to make informed decisions about content. For instance, journalists may choose to include more quotes from residents affected by fires, or from on-the-ground firefighters. Journalists can also more comprehensively describe the diverse types of wildfire impacts and the locations they occur in, even if those locations have less name recognition than other nearby places with fewer impacts. Official spokespeople can more often include messages of climate change, risk prevention, inequality, and other important social and ecological context when discussing wildfires, and journalists can work to give attention to those messages and contexts in addition to the more sensational and event-driven details in media coverage.



MORE INFORMATION

This brief is based on the following article:

Cordner, A. and Schwartz, E. 2019. Covering Wildfires: Media Emphasis and Silence after the Carlton and Okanogan Complex Wildfires. *Society & Natural Resources*, 32:5, 489-507. DOI: 10.1080/08941920.2018.1530816.

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This research brief was funded by the Joint Fire Science Program.

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