

GOOD NEWS IN DISASTER JOURNALISM FOR CHILDREN AS A RESILIENCE ENHANCER

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INTRODUCTION

The earthquakes hit Central Italy during 2016 and 2017, starting from 24 August 2016. The most violent tremors occurred on 24 August 2016 (6.0 magnitude), 26 October 2016 (5.4 and 5.9 magnitude), 30 October 2016 (6.5 magnitude) and 18 January 2017 (5.1, 5.5, 5.4 and 5.0 magnitude). The situation was dramatic. In the Macerata district, where this research study took place, there were no victims. However, damage occurred to most of the buildings, especially close to the epicenters: 341 schools were damaged and 20,000 people were left without a home within a few seconds.

The editorial project named *Cronache Maceratesi Junior* (Cmj) already existed at the time. This is a local online newspaper created in 2016 that mainly addresses children, families and schools, with a focus on good news. Good news (by which we mean articles with positive, encouraging contents), are often a small part of newspapers nowadays, but not of this one. So while the “normal” section of the newspaper (Cronache Maceratesi) mainly covered the current news for an adult audience, Cmj

focused on children and their social environment to show the good, even in a disaster.

After more than two years since the earthquakes occurred, this chapter shows how “good news” was written in Cmj during and after the disaster and discusses the hypothesis that the way in which news was created helped to promote resilience among the population.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Communication and Resilience

This work is based on the relationship between resilience and communication. Resilience is defined as “a process linking a set of adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation after a disturbance” (Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche & Pfefferbaum, 2008, p.130), whilst community resilience is “a process linking a set of networked adaptive capacities to a positive trajectory of functioning and adaptation in constituent populations after a disturbance” (Norris et al., 2008). The qualities of personal resilience (Cantoni, 2014) include: optimism; self-esteem; psychological stability (control, commitment and challenge); ability to focus on good things; and social support (listening and telling). At a community level (Patel, Rogers, Amlôt & Rubin, 2017) resilience is a product of such factors as local knowledge; community networks and relationships;

communication; health; governance; resources; preparedness; mental outlook; and economic investment.

The role of newspapers during a disaster entails the general field of “communication”. Good and reliable communication is one of the factors that make a resilient reaction possible (Norris et al., 2008), both at an individual and at a community level. Norris et al (2008, p.140) define communication as “the creation of common meanings and understandings and the provision of opportunities for members to articulate needs, views, and attitudes”. A more specific meaning that deals with information is also considered: “Information and communication become vital in emergencies. People need accurate information about the danger and behavioural options, and they need it quickly” (p.140). Finally, the consideration that “the presence of communal narratives” gives “the experience shared meaning and purpose. [...] The media shape how a disaster is framed in ways that influence both survivors’ and others’ understanding of the event, including emergency managers” (p.140).

Bronfenbrenner’s Theory and Journalism

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), every individual deals with four different levels, starting from the nearest one (microsystem) which then goes further to the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem which is the furthest one and includes culture,

traditions and social assets. Journalism addresses the exosystem and the mesosystem and sometimes challenges the macrosystem. At a local level, journalism can shape the so-called public opinion, that includes what people think of their community. Neely (2015) analyses the experiences of young people working as journalists for school newspapers, and underlines the potentials of “empowering youth voice for building stronger local communities” and that “youth journalists find tremendous empowerment in the ability to have a voice in their communities, to represent their generation in telling their own stories, and to partner with adults in this process” (p. 2307). We therefore start from the assumption that this process could work in both directions: from and to the youth and their social environments.

METHODOLOGY

The present study analyses 168 articles with “earthquake” or its consequences as the main topic, published in *Cmj* between 24 August 2016 and 30 December 2017. The analysis covered titles, contents (body of the articles), views and dates. The outputs of the analysis of words used are divided in two main figures, to show the frequency of words in titles and contents. An analysis of how the articles were shaped in order for readers to relate to and help them deal with the situation was also carried out. The authors of

the articles are both journalists and young people, including children who live in the Macerata district.

FINDINGS

Views.

Figure 1 shows an overview of the dates when the articles were published in relation to how many times they were read (views). The graph shows peaks of readers after every main earthquake, with a concentration of readers through the emergency period. The most read article was published the same morning of the first shake, giving information on how to behave and deal with fear. In this frame of time articles were mostly informative: what to do in

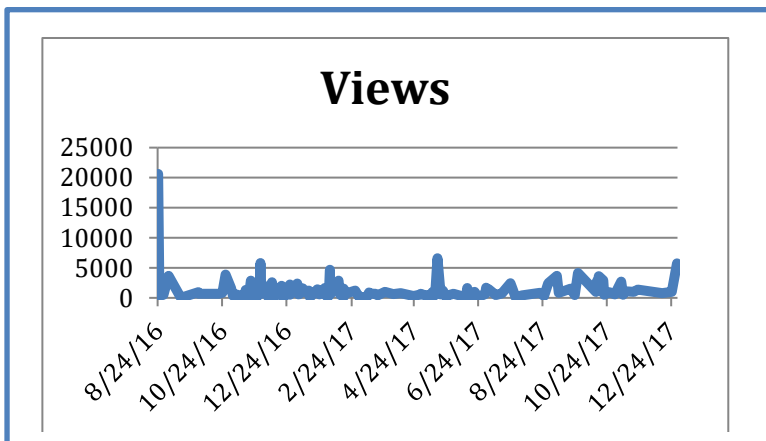


Figure 1. Article Views.

case of emergency; ways of discussing fear and emotional pain; who is helping the population and so on. The number of views decreased from February 2017 until the end of April 2017. This can also be related to the mass movement of population from the affected territory to the coast in the region. Views increased again after May 2017: people were returning to their homes following the construction of emergency shelters. The highest peak of readers coincided with a very emotional article in which a child asked the government to take action. From that point Cmj continued to write about schools, donations, demolitions, stories and voices from the territory hit by the earthquake. These articles collected a total of 194,962 views.

Titles.

Titles analysis provides an insight into the main focus of the articles. The most frequent words used in titles are “per” (76), “scuola” (29), “bambini” (25), “sisma” (19), “solidarietà” (13), “dei” (13), and “dal” (10). Figure 2 shows a visual synthesis (in Italian). The translation in English would be: “for”, “children”, “earthquake”, “solidarity”, “’s/by” (depending on the context) and “from”. We decided not to omit the 3 letter words because they contain useful information about how the messages were shaped.

For example, the word “per/for” was used in the following context: the “per” particle is related to the words “children” and “school” in many articles, indicating that something was made *for* them, in order to help them. In other titles it is related to a verb. These verbs often indicate a way to deal with the situation (“raise funds”, “be back to normal”, “forget the earthquake for a while”, “helping” and so on). Another two 3 letter words were included: “dei/’s” and “dal/from”. “Dei/’s” is often found in the titles when using the word “children”. We have children’s “drawings”, “hopes” and “dreams”. Then we have “dei” meaning “by”. So we have gifts and donations *by* several people or institutions: military, families, and children themselves. “Dal/from” is often a geographical indication from where help and solidarity arrived.

The second main word used is “school”. This resonates with Bronfenbrenner’s theory, with school being one of the main systems of the microsystem, especially for children. The articles are mainly concerned with how schools reacted to the events, such as fund raising, new solutions, events for children and families, and donations from other realities. During the emergency, schools were represented as important protective institutions for the social fabric of the affected communities.

The word “earthquake” and “solidarity” have a similar frequency. This underlines that Cmj tackled the topic whilst always pointing out the positive side of an emergency, which is

to make the best decisions possible in the circumstances whilst drawing attention to the trauma. Additionally, the 268 “non” can be interpreted in this way: as an indication to exclude, avoid, and erase. Emotional processing is useful in developing resilience.

Four hundred and sixty one references to important places in children’s lives were also observed, primarily the school and home. The frequency of “home” is less than a third of “school”. The reason for this is that homes were a sensitive topic due to the damage and destruction caused by the earthquakes.

With regards to subjects, words that indicate the communitarian level of the emergency and its resolution were noted. Words such as “everybody” and verbs conjugated in the first person plural, were mentioned 321 times. Here, the articles addressed the reader as a part of a wider community. The community includes families, friends and also the helpers. On the other hand, there was a high use of direct speech related to the many individuals who found a voice through the newspaper. Every story, when published, let people share their problems at a wider level, often offering an implicit message: you are not alone.

This information can help people to elaborate on personal experiences in a socio-cognitive way, and encourages cognitive processes to understand the problem. However, it does this within a social relations framework: among journalists and readers,

readers and the newspaper, experts and readers, and individual stories and collective narratives.

Articles' features and resilience factors.

We synthesised the features of articles that emerged from the analysis above with the following tags: “positive side”; “what’s going on” (explanations); “we are in this together”; “who can help” (including “how can I help”) and “I have a voice”. These features are related to the resilience factors at personal or community levels. With regards to personal resilience, the “positive side” meets “optimism” and “the ability to focus on good things”. When we know “what’s going on” we also support our “psychological stability”. The collective dimension (“we are in this together”) relates to “optimism”, “psychological stability” “the ability to focus on good things” again, but also to “social support”. “Who can help” addresses “self-esteem” and “social support” as well. Finally, the possibility to “have a voice” affects “self esteem” as well as “psychological stability” and “social support”. As demonstrated here, all the main factors of personal resilience are taken into consideration by the articles. With regards to community resilience, the “mental outlook” of the community is influenced by every article’s features. “Local knowledge” is affected by the possibility of knowing “what’s going on” and “who can help”. “Community networks” are also influenced by all

factors, apart from “positive side”. “Communication” in this case in a transversal feature, but it will most probably be most affected by information about “what’s going on” and the possibility to speak directly (“I have a voice”). “Governance”, “resources” and “economic investment” are mainly out of the direct influence of journalism, but they can be influenced by information in a transversal way. “Preparedness” relates to “what’s going on” and “who can help” while “health” has no direct connection with the articles, except from information about psychological support.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the study, we hypothesised that the way in which news is conceived could have an influence on the resilience of the population. The results show that features of articles are most related to features of resilience both at a personal and at a community level. Explanations, information, individual and collective narratives given from a positive angle help to bolster the resilience of the community during adverse circumstances. So the design of articles and titles succeed in the intentions of possibly driving a resilient response in the audience. However, the main problem of the study was the inability to measure the impact of the articles except from measuring the views, even if the wide reach of articles could still be a good indicator of the fact that messages were able to reach the population hit by earthquakes. The next step

of the research will involve journalists, in order to expand this model of writing and to increase the awareness of professionals regarding the impact (positive or negative) that their work has on personal and community resilience.

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