

## The L'Aquila earthquake case is not “science on trial”. It is a challenge to the way public officials communicate risk.

by Blog Admin

*Last week six scientists and a former government official were sentenced to imprisonment for their reassurances about safety prior to the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila which killed over 300 people. While many commentators have expressed deep concern that this is a case of 'science on trial', **Julien Etienne** and **Tommaso Palermo** contend that the trial is one of public communication. They argue that in countries such as Italy, officials have sometimes downplayed natural or technological risks to reassure the public, at little cost to themselves if they happened to be wrong. The L'Aquila trial and verdict may be a sign that this is now changing.*



On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October, an Italian court sentenced six scientists and a former government official to six years imprisonment in relation to the earthquake that killed more than 300 people in L'Aquila in April, 2009. According to the prosecutors and the families of the victims, the accused failed to evaluate and then communicate the potential risk to the population. Specifically, their alleged negligence is related to a public meeting held in the city of L'Aquila on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2009, where the six scientists had been asked to provide expert advice on the situation in L'Aquila. The meeting came after weeks of tremors and warnings of a forthcoming major earthquake propagated by a local amateur seismologist, which caused alarm in the population.



This trial has been widely labelled a 'trial of science' which resonates universally. It has been implied that the judgement has found human responsibility in a natural disaster: a 'medieval' and 'chilling' connection. However, it seems that this interpretation ignores key facts of the case, and contrary to much media coverage, we do not see a universal case of 'science on trial.' We rather find elements of national or regional peculiarity.

Firstly, the nature of the charges has been **misrepresented** in the media as a failure to predict an earthquake. But the accusation refers to unreasonable reassurances given by the six scientists, part of a 'major risks' advisory expert panel, and the government official that communicated to the media on that day. The nature of the 'unusual' meeting is also important. Contrary to established practice, the meeting

was held in L'Aquila and open to the public. It was rather short and actions to be undertaken were not discussed. No formal statement was released after the meeting, while the minutes of the meeting were not prepared until after the earthquake had occurred. A press conference and interviews with the government official were the only public comments to emerge immediately after the meeting.

A central element in the dispute is an 'optimistic' interview given by the government official after the meeting. He argued that the 'scientific community' confirmed that the multiple tremors were a good sign as energies were being discharged instead of piling up. This assertion has been strongly disputed, even by the convicted scientists during the trial. [New evidence](#) suggests that the Head of Civil Protection (the direct superior of the convicted government official) had this idea in mind before the meeting took place. Investigators heard him (at the time his phone was tapped because of investigations in a corruption probe) to make clear that the message 'the more tremors, the less danger' had to be conveyed to the local population as an indisputable scientific fact.

Finally, a (now popular) video shows the convicted government official inviting the citizens of the area to stay calm. Prompted by the journalist, in what was intended as a joke, the government official suggested having a glass of wine. [The evidence](#) suggests that the repeated government reassurances led a number of families to stay in their houses when a tremor shook L'Aquila late into the night on April 5, just a couple of hours before the major earthquake struck the city.

From the above it emerges that the meeting of experts was a staged public relations exercise to reassure the population. In that sense, the L'Aquila trial is a trial of public communication, to which scientists took part, possibly without fully realising what they were getting into. Their presence at L'Aquila seems crucial: without them 'on board', the reassuring words of the government official might not have carried as much weight. Indeed, the key accusation is that the scientists failed to provide recommendations for community preparedness in case of an earthquake. This is one of the reasons why [there are members of the international seismologist community](#) who have also been critical of the Italian seismologists.

The absence of a formal statement after the meeting and the ambiguous nature of the meeting minutes (if prepared only after the earthquake actually occurred) contradict an influential body of research showing how organisations of all kinds have become increasingly preoccupied with the production of written accounts to prove, if need be, that proper procedures are followed. The question is why this happened in the case of L'Aquila. Is it a matter of individual negligence? Or are country-specific factors at play here? Indeed, most of the literature on the expansion of written forms of accountability refers to the Anglo-Saxon world. As put by an interviewee in an on-going [CARR project on risk culture](#), the need to write everything down in terms of processes and evidence might be an 'English disease'.

It is also the attitude of government officials (and perhaps of scientists too) towards public demands for information that suggests country-level specificity. In some countries government officials will prepare the public for the worst so as to avoid blame in case the worst case actually happens (e.g. in London in preparation for public transportation problems during the Olympics, or in New York ahead of Hurricane Sandy). Yet in other countries government officials might also believe that their job is to reassure the public: French state officials downplayed the risks of the Chernobyl radioactive cloud; similarly Italian officials downplayed the risks of an earthquake in L'Aquila. Accountability systems in these countries have long made such statements mostly 'risk-free' for those who made them. The trial of L'Aquila might be a sign that times have changed.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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