

Media Narratives and Resilience: Analysing Disaster Risk Communication in Sardinia and Sicily

Alessandro Lovari

Università degli Studi di Cagliari, Italy

Cinzia Atzeni

Università degli Studi di Cagliari, Italy

Norma Baldino

Università degli Studi di Cagliari, Italy

Gevisa La Rocca

Università Kore di Enna, Italy

Abstract: In the context of environmental disasters, the role of the media in strengthening social cohesion and fostering disaster response processes has been emphasised by the theoretical framework of Social Responsibility Theory (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956). This framework underscores the importance of conveying news that informs but also educates and promotes greater social awareness. Some research suggests that media often prioritise narratives focusing on governmental blame and responsibility, while neglecting in-depth coverage of social causes and effects (Albrecht, 2021). Other studies highlight how responsible media coverage can enhance community preparedness and resilience during disasters (Sellnow and Seeger 2013; Poudel et al., 2014). This paper examines the media coverage of floods on the Italian islands of Sardinia and Sicily (2022–2024), focusing on the textual frames employed by national, regional, and local press and online newspapers. Frame analysis facilitates the observation of narrative dynamics surrounding disaster prevention, management, and reconstruction practices. The study focused on three narrative phases of flooding events (pre-, during, and post-event) and investigated: a) risk predictability and mitigation; b) the extent of information dissemination during the event; and c) the processes of blame attribution and political claims, as well as their effects on social cohesion and damage recovery.

Keywords — Disasters, flood, insularity, media coverage, resilience.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Lovari, A., Atzeni, C., Baldino, N., La Rocca, G., (2025). Media narratives and resilience: analysing disaster risk communication in Sardinia and Sicily. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference*, 13(1) 20-23. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/001c.142825>

INTRODUCTION

This contribution, part of the ongoing PRIN PNRR research project INSULANDER, analyzes media narratives of floods in Sicily and Sardinia to explore how disaster communication can support social awareness and resilience. These islands are

ISSN: 3068-6539

© 2025 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

Publication rights are licensed to ICRCA.

<https://doi.org/10.69931/001c.142825>

characterized by distinct vulnerabilities—both natural and socio-political—that amplify the risks posed by such events. The main objective of this research is to examine the journalistic narratives of floods in the two islands and how they shape public perception, influence risk awareness and contribute to social resilience. By analyzing how the media frame flood events, the study aims to highlight the potential of media in promoting preparedness and addressing structural vulnerability. The paper outlines key theoretical references, presents the methodological framework, and discusses preliminary findings on the relationship between media, risk perception, and territorial vulnerability. However, this paper aims to extend these insights by focusing specifically on how media narratives in island regions, such as Sicily and Sardinia, interact with territorial vulnerabilities and contribute to resilience-building efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Environmental disasters, such as floods, require a context-sensitive approach, particularly in island regions like Sicily and Sardinia, where natural vulnerabilities, social conflicts, and land management issues intersect, amplifying risk perception [1]. From a constructivist perspective, risk is not an objective reality, but a social construct, shaped through media framing. The media play a central role in guiding public understanding by framing information in particular ways that influence how disasters are perceived and responded to [2] [3] [4]. However, media coverage often tends to focus on the event itself, rather than on the underlying structural causes, potentially leading to the sensationalization or spectacularization of the disaster narrative (Tierney 2003; Nogami 2018). This perspective aligns with the results of previous research, which distinguishes between the phases of disaster narratives—pre/during/post—highlighting the role of the media in shaping public concerns, transmitting information, and attributing responsibility [5] [6]. Furthermore, previous research suggests that different types of media and key social actors significantly influence public responses and the framing of responsibilities [7] [8]. This paper extends these insights by focusing specifically on the role of media narratives in island regions, particularly in Sicily and Sardinia. It examines how the media's framing of flood events intersects with territorial vulnerabilities and contributes to resilience-building processes.

Grounded in the Social Responsibility Theory [9], this study examines the narrative frames within which media report flood disasters in Sardinia and Sicily, the social actors they involve, and the relationship between media coverage and government actions across different phases of the disaster, particularly in vulnerable areas. Responsible media communication, through timely and localized information, can reduce uncertainty and support public preparedness and collective resilience [10].

METHODS

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to analyze media coverage of flood events in Sicily and Sardinia. The research combines a quantitative analysis of the characteristics of media coverage and a qualitative analysis of the narrative frames, both textual and visual, used in the media. The quantitative analysis focuses on the frequency and distribution (national, regional and local) of articles, while the qualitative analysis explores the themes discussed and the portrayal of governmental actions. The sample includes 141 articles (90 from Sardinia, 51 from Sicily), selected using the *L'Eco della Stampa* platform, which enabled the collection of articles from December 31, 2021, to April 30, 2024. The 141 articles were analysed by two coders, following a codebook structured around three main research questions:

RQ1: How much media coverage do Sardinian and Sicilian flood events receive in online and print newspapers? What are the characteristics of these journalistic representations?

RQ2: Which disaster's phases does the narration focus on? In this media narration, how do the media portray governmental actions taken to manage risk?

RQ3: What frames are used in reporting on flood events? Which institutional actors are most prominently represented in journalistic coverage of floods?

Data coding was guided by a codebook developed deductively, including 36 variables grouped into three areas: article identification, institutional actors and government actions, and narrative frames (textual and visual). To ensure consistency of the data, inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, with scores above 0.96 for most variables, indicating high reliability in the coding process. The results allow for an analysis of how media narratives influence public perception and risk management in vulnerable areas.

RESULTS

RQ1- MEDIA COVERAGE AND NARRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF FLOODS IN SARDINIA AND SICILY

The corpus analyzed includes 141 articles published between December 2021 and April 2024: 69% from online sources and 31% from print media. Coverage is primarily regional (61%), with 39% from national newspapers. Sentiment analysis reveals regional differences: in Sicily, coverage is predominantly negative (62%), while in Sardinia, it is more balanced (31% positive, 30% neutral, 39% negative).

Journalistic narratives show a stronger local anchoring in Sardinia, particularly in the provinces of Sassari and Nuoro, where past flood events in Bitti and Olbia shaped media attention. In contrast, Sicilian coverage lacks a strong focus on specific locations, tending instead toward generalized narratives.

The spatial framing of the disaster also differs: while regional representation prevails in both islands (42%), Sardinian articles often

emphasize the community dimension (41%), whereas Sicilian coverage leans toward national-institutional framing (29%). These patterns suggest distinct narrative strategies, likely linked to differences in how the phases of the disaster are communicated and the roles attributed to institutional actors.

RQ2 - DISASTER PHASES AND MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF GOVERNMENTAL ACTIONS

Media narratives in Sicily focus more on ongoing floods (13.2%) and post-disaster reconstruction (55.8%), whereas Sardinian coverage emphasizes the pre-disaster phase, including prevention and preparedness (60%). This difference contributes to a higher negative sentiment in Sicilian news (62%) compared to Sardinia. Government actions are more positively represented in Sardinia (28%) through reports on structural and non-structural measures, emergency planning, and effective communication. In Sicily, only 2% of articles present such actions positively, while 68% depict them as neutral—often compromise policies lacking structural impact. Expert opinion is more prominent in Sicilian pre-disaster narratives, often highlighting institutional shortcomings. Negative evaluations of government responses are slightly more frequent in Sardinia (24%) and linked to ineffective prevention and delayed interventions.

RQ3 – FRAMES AND INSTITUTIONAL ACTORS INVOLVED IN MEDIA COVERAGE

Flood-related news in Sicily is mainly framed through recovery (41%) and vulnerability (35%), reflecting a focus on reconstruction and exposure to risk. In Sardinia, the responsibility frame is more frequent (20%), alongside human interest (12%) and political frames (7%), indicating greater emphasis on accountability and local experiences. Institutional actors mirror these differences: national-level institutions (Civil Protection 32%, Government 23%) dominate Sicilian news, while regional and municipal actors are central in Sardinia (Region 34%, Municipalities 31%). The Sardinian press appears more critical of local authorities, as shown by the presence of both positive and negative evaluations of their actions. In contrast, Sicily's narrative is more neutral, with institutional failures embedded in vulnerability and expert commentary rather than direct attribution of blame.

CONCLUSION

This study compared 141 flood-related articles from Sardinia and Sicily, uncovering distinct regional media narratives. Sicilian coverage focuses on vulnerability and recovery, with a national-institutional lens and a predominantly negative tone (62%), while Sardinian media adopt a more localized and balanced perspective. Disaster phase analysis shows that Sicilian media emphasize post-disaster and ongoing events, often critically, whereas Sardinian outlets stress prevention and preparedness. Framing also differs: Sardinia foregrounds responsibility and human interest, while Sicily emphasizes recovery and fragility. Institutional actors vary accordingly, with national bodies more visible in Sicily, and local institutions central in Sardinia. These narrative choices influence how risk and governance are perceived, underlining the media's role in shaping public trust and disaster response. Future research will explore how such narratives affect public engagement and institutional accountability.

Authors Biography

Alessandro Lovari, PhD Sapienza University of Rome, Associate Professor, Department of Political and Social Science, University of Cagliari, alessandro.lovari@unica.it

Cinzia Atzeni, PhD University of Cagliari, Post Doctoral Researcher, Department of Political and Social Science, cinzia.atzeni@unica.it

Norma Baldino, PhD University Complutense of Madrid, Post Doctoral Researcher, Department of Political and Social Science, norma.baldino@unica.it

Gevisa La Rocca, PhD University of Palermo, Associate Professor, Department of Human and Social Sciences, University Kore of Enna, gevisa.larocca@unikore.it

REFERENCES

- [1] Ivčević A., Mazurek H., Siame L., Bertoldo R., Statzu V., Agharroud K., Bellier O. (2021). The importance of raising risk awareness: Lessons learned about risk awareness sessions from the Mediterranean region (North Morocco and West Sardinia, Italy). *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences Discussions*, (pp. 1-25).
- [2] Entman R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- [3] Altheide D. L. (1997). The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 38(4), 647-668.
- [4] Vogler D., Meissner F. (2024). The mediated construction of crises-combining automated and qualitative content analysis to investigate the use of crisis labels in headlines of Swiss news media between 1998 and 2020. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 7(1), 83-112.
- [5] Poudel B. R., FitzGerald G., Clark M. J., Mehta A., Poudyal M. B. (2014). How does Nepal Television (NTV) frame natural disasters? A qualitative content analysis of news scripts using news frames and PPRR cycle. *Fifth Int. Disaster and Risk Conf. (IDRC 2014), Davos, Switzerland, United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction*, (pp. 583-586).
- [6] Zaheer, L. (2016). Media coverage of natural disasters in Pakistan: The case of Earthquake (2005), Flood (2010) and Famine

- (2014). *Journal of the research society of Pakistan*, 53, 1.
- [7] Albrecht F. (2022). Natural hazards as political events: Framing and politicisation of floods in the United Kingdom. *Environmental Hazards*, 21(1), 17-35.
- [8] Ali S. A., Gill D. A. (2022). Media Framing and Agenda Setting (Tone) in News Coverage of Hurricane Harvey: A Content Analysis of the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Houston Chronicle from 2017 to 2018. *Weather, Climate, and Society*, 14(2) 637-649.
- [9] Siebert, F.S., Peterson, T. and Schramm, W. (1956). *Four Theories of the Media*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana III.
- [10] Sellnow, T. L., Seeger, M. W. (2013). *Theorizing crisis communication*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.