

Media Coverage and the Risk of Trauma: The 2017 Forest Fires in Portugal

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Background:

In 2017 Portugal was hit by its greatest tragedy in decades. Within four months, two large forest fires (originated in Pedrógão Grande, on June 17th, and in the central area of the country, on October 15th) leading to the death of 116 people, hundreds of injured and the destruction of thousands of houses in more than fifty municipalities.

Due to its tragic consequences, the summer of 2017 will forever remain in the memory of the Portuguese population. However, even though the traumatic events have left a visible mark on the victims, survivors and professionals working in these scenarios, the intense media coverage of the fires had (and continues to have) a determinant role in the mental health of those involved, and in the community in general. Recognizing the possible impact of media coverage of these events on the Portuguese population, we decided to discuss the role of journalistic pieces in the stress reactions, as well as in the recovery process of those affected by the 2017 fires.

Objective:

This study aimed at analyzing the influence of the media coverage in the stress reactions of the Portuguese population after the 2017 forest fires.

Method:

Through the analysis of published journalistic pieces published about the 2017 forest fires, interviews with the victims and with professionals who have treated the victims of these events, this study identified the main aspects that may contribute to media coverage becoming a stress factor for victims, help workers, the general public, and the journalists themselves.

Results:

Through the analysis of the journalistic pieces reported in the months after the events, it became clear that the forest fires were the dominant theme in the media throughout 2017, a trend that has continued increasing in 2018, mainly in the first anniversaries of the two tragedies (June and October 2017). According to the News Barometer of the Portuguese Observatory of Communication, between June 2017 and May 2018, 12,5% of the news published (or reported) were related to the summer fires, ranging from various fields.

In addition, our research pointed out that the media coverage has reported beyond the facts, exposing the affected population in a state of vulnerability. Guided by editorial pressure and the competitiveness of the field, many journalists chose to resort to sensationalism, using the pain of the victims to illustrate the story, disregarding the privacy of those involved (Brayne, 2004; Rees, 2007). The excessive repetition of distressing images; the broadcasting of dead bodies or charred cars; the permanent use of certain expressions (like the phrase "road of death", in relation to the road where tens died burned); and interviews with victims in shock, unable to be aware of themselves, are some examples of behaviors practiced by media after the forest fires of 2017.

Regarding the traumatic stress, there are two aspects that must be taken into account.



(1) The phenomenon of "vicarious traumatization" of those exposed to continuous "bombardment" of images (Sales, 2007). Vicarious trauma may affect all Portuguese population that can easily suffer a "second hand trauma", due to the mediatic exposure.

(2) The latter "retraumatization" induced by media - this is the major concern introduced by the professionals who worked in the 2017 fires. The media search for culprits, the use of the fires in the political debate and the celebration of anniversaries, are some reminders to the victims who, almost two years later, find it difficult still hard to turn on the televisions or read the newspapers without reviving what happened. Media coverage, especially the way it exposes the tragedy and its consequences, seems to be a factor that can prevent the effective overcoming of traumatic experiences.

Conclusion:

There seems to be a direct influence of the media coverage in the stress reactions at three levels: (1) the revival of trauma in the victims and, subsequently, the greater difficulty of overcoming it; (2) the development of a traumatic symptomatology in the general population; and (3) the traumatization of journalists themselves. The findings of the current study reinforce the fact that journalists must take special care regarding the way they share information, respecting the ethical and deontological conduct of their profession, but also as citizens who are concerned about the consequences, in a mental health level, on those who are exposed to their work. Despite the need to ensure the dissemination of information, a sensitive and effective coverage may prevent the rekindle of traumatic memories, protecting the victims from a risk of (re)traumatization.

The training of journalists on how best to report disasters is an increasingly relevant subject, which should be discussed. This is also a pressing concern for Centro de Trauma/CES, which is currently working closely with the union of journalists and other associations linked to the media, in order to structure a group supporting media professionals, focusing on the issues of psychological trauma.

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