

Risk Communication, Perception and Warning Fatigue: the Australian Bushfires

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Warning Fatigue: What is it and why does it matter?

Cry-wolf syndrome, and 'warning fatigue effect' are generally recognised terms for cynicism or apathy that can result from being 'over-warned'. It has been anecdotally observed in disciplines of health, meteorology, defense and military, emergency and disaster management. There is an assumption that not only does warning fatigue exist, but that it also has a negative impact on warning responses.

Warning fatigue poses a risk communication challenge where dissemination of "high alarm" messages that do not eventuate in an event of corresponding magnitude, can lead to reduced vigilance and preparation, despite the very real nature of the threat. Emergency managers have been known to downplay the severity of a potential disaster, or hesitate to warn appropriately because they are worried that the public will be affected by warning fatigue. Yet (to date) there has been minimal empirical research that definitively validates, quantifies or describes this phenomenon.

Research Questions

These questions will be explored within the bushfire-risk context

- What happens when authorities repeatedly alert the public about potential disasters that do not eventuate?
- Can Warning Fatigue influence perception of risk messages?
- Is Warning Fatigue a 'one-off' or cumulative effect?
- What is the size of this effect?
- Is Warning Fatigue a function of warnings over time rather than frequency?
- Does the media play a role in attenuating or amplifying Warning Fatigue?
- Do cultural imperatives (such as collectivism or individualism) have any bearing on how warnings are interpreted and acted upon?

Methodology

Interviews

- Two rounds of semi-structured interviews
- Participants from two bushfire-vulnerable areas (Tasmania & Victoria)
- Two different cohorts
 - Active members of Community Fireguard Association
 - Not actively involved in any community bushfire mitigation
- Male and female, ages ranged from 26 to 77 including single people and those with dependent children.

Media

Participants from the first round of interviews felt strongly that the media had over-hyped and panicked the public by:

- over-reporting bushfire issues since Black Saturday
- creating a 'new-normal' in terms of bushfire severity potential.
- warnings had increased in frequency and intensity
- believed the public had become 'desensitized' to issues of bushfires and their dangers.

To validate this, articles from the Melbourne Age and the Herald-Sun which reported on bushfires 15 months before and 15 months after Black Saturday, will be evaluated. This should show any differences between pre and post Black Saturday reporting and may validate participant's anecdotal observations.

Epistemology & Analysis

Social Constructivist: it is through the everyday interactions between people in the course of social life that versions of knowledge and ways of understanding the world are shaped.

Grounded Theory: a research method in which the theory is developed from the data, rather than the other way around.

Content analysis: of newspaper articles coding for variables such as sensationalism, self-efficacy and public understanding of science.

Thematic analysis: of interview transcripts, coded for patterns and themes, concepts or terms. The analysis includes interpreting and theorizing about the results.

Discourse analysis: discourses or 'ways of talking about' define the topic (Foucault 1973), articulate knowledge and produce meaning. What discourses have the media and public used to construct the issue of bushfire?

The aim of this research is to provide agencies with ways to engage with communities by identifying issues associated with warnings processes and just as importantly, identify how to frame and communicate hazard warnings in ways that reduce the risk of warning fatigue and community complacency.