


Article

# The Visual Sociography of Disaster Journalism: A Local Case Study

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**Abstract:** Recent national and international emergencies have repeatedly highlighted the role of information, and local information in particular, in synthesising various social and cultural policies proposed by public authorities and providing a correct representation of the living conditions of citizens on the ground, overcoming national media logics that are often based on the speed and spectacularisation of disasters. In fact, citizens have an “innate need” to know what is happening beyond their direct experience, to be aware of events that affect them or that are not happening in front of their eyes. A sociographic approach can be a supportive methodology to remember victims and report on disasters, but also to reconstruct new narratives by socially anticipating future environmental emergencies with the support of the media. Sociography as social narrative weaves together scientific analysis and journalistic storytelling, an old qualitative method that needs to be rediscovered, updated and integrated with new tools and methods. In this study, disaster narratives and analyses are supported by visual journalistic sources. In part, it takes up the gauntlet that Bruno Latour throws down to sociologists in *Down to Earth*, arguing that the latter should shift the focus of inquiry from theoretical analyses of social problems to descriptions of the existence of problems in experimental contexts, local shared spaces and common practices. This paper considers the description of (and within) the journalistic field as a methodological problem, examines the strengths and limitations of existing descriptive approaches and develops a different way of using a sociographic imagination in an attempt to make sense of changing journalistic practices with reference to specific Italian crisis events.



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## 1. Introduction

Natural disasters are unpredictable, extraordinary events that destabilise the social structure by generating disorder, causing human losses and destruction.

The ‘Rapporto Città Clima 2023 Speciale Alluvioni’ by environment association Legambiente highlights the increase in floods and heavy rains in Italy, highlighting the fragility of the country in the face of the climate crisis and denouncing the cuts in resources for the prevention of hydrogeological instability (ISPRA, 2023).

Many studies in Italy and elsewhere have repeatedly highlighted how the role of information, particularly local information, must be that of synthesising the various social and cultural policies proposed by public bodies and the correct representation of the condition of citizens’ lives in the area, going beyond national media logics, which are often based on speed and the spectacularisation of disasters (Radcliffe & Wallace, 2021).

Local journalism can support cultural production and local heritage and also enhance the social and political participation of individual communities in their own language, respecting their traditions and conditions. Community media is not only limited to providing access to public space, but also to the intimate life of local communities (Comunello & Mulargia, 2018). Despite the fact that local newsrooms, as well as all news agencies, now operate with reduced margins, forced to deal with changing news consumption habits and the shift from print to online news, which reduce the functioning of existing business models and the desirability of existing information products and services, it is in these situations of social and informational disorder that the centrality of territory-based journalism is revealed (Radcliffe & Wallace, 2021).

Reporting from the local area means constructing a reasoned point of view and not a mere exposition of facts.

The local newspaper does not only collect news, but becomes a place of active intermediation, of aggregation. In this regard, Hoak (2021) prefers to speak of 'geo-social' news, content selected and hierarchised around the notions of relevance and place.

Information that speaks of and in the community, in fact, should seek to understand the plurality of components from which the social environment is made up and allow us to define interpretative outlooks through which to understand the world. Additionally, the local newspaper is a cultural expedient that provides the possibility of recognition; it becomes a meeting place.

The activity of a local newspaper is very much influenced by the place where it is located; it is important to understand whether there are more factories or more fields to cultivate, what work the inhabitants of the area do and what interests they have.

The lay of the land itself can make a huge difference, especially during a natural disaster.

News agencies alone can no longer do all the work of 'whipping the news into shape' and intervening by verifying its veracity, just as they cannot post dozens of up-to-date articles online and, at the same time, work with the pace of print media in the newsroom.

However, in this context of emergency coverage of natural disasters, it is visual media (images, videos), particularly local media, that document and convey the possible risk, impact and severity of a hazard. Problems arise when the images circulating, on a large scale and at high speed, are manipulated, false or come from an unrelated event or place.

These problematic images can have an impact on the way communities interpret the risk of an emergency. Furthermore, when visual media present information (e.g., a signal) that conflicts with what an emergency services agency is instructing the public to do, this can lead to uncertainty and confusion in the community on how to act (Feldman & Hart, 2021).

Generally, media photo news, and even those collected for this research, are almost always problematic images that conflict with the emergency instructions to be taken during a natural disaster emergency, given the speed at which images are generated and the increasing expectations of agencies for real-time information on an event.

This is further exacerbated by conflicting views on who is responsible for verifying images disseminated during an event, despite fact-checking, source-checking, verification and denial being long-standing journalistic practices. News images and texts that focus on climate-oriented actions can increase hope and, in the case of texts, decrease fear and anger, and these effects generally hold across the ideological spectrum. In turn, the influence of emotions on policy support depends on ideology. Hope and fear increase support for climate policies for all ideological groups but particularly conservatives, whereas anger polarises the opinions of liberals and conservatives (Feldman & Hart, 2021).

But what can be seen in the way disasters were covered by the local media in the pre-digital era? Which frames emerged and still emerge today?

## 2. The Tale of Local Disasters

In a recent research piece ([Buoncompagni, 2024](#)) on the local Italian newspapers' accounts of the recent floods in Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, a number of theoretical elements emerged, which we consider useful to repropose in this opening section in order to provide a clear framework on the subject.

The new ecology of information already characterises our private and professional lives and is increasingly hyperlocal.

Hyperlocal journalism is made up of actors operating in online and offline environments who produce media content dedicated exclusively to a single territory, be it a city or a neighbourhood, and targeting a specific community.

This is a way of 'doing journalism' that appears 'hybrid' in its architecture ([Splendore, 2017](#)) that also involves local information and at the same time characterises the community journalism culture in itself closer than that produced by national or international media, but which now finds itself competing with an unstructured information overload that circulates mainly within different platforms. Groups and profiles of citizens who, while not intentionally making information, end up updating and reporting events or news facts, are condemned to an endless scroll of fake news, conspiracy theories, memes and virtual brawls and uncivil debates within digital infrastructures, which have now become 'places' to be de-platformed ([Greenberg & Scanlon, 2016](#); [Lovink, 2023](#)).

The public space defined by the journalistic media is a crowded arena of topics and subjects that are protagonists of the same moods and comments produced by these protagonists, or by all those who intervene to clarify, comment and specify. This is a space that widens the more that information flows and the more that subjects are able to intervene within it.

This is why we speak of 'thickening' in the media sphere, where information becomes overloaded in an increasingly articulated plurality of directions ([Sorrentino & Bianda, 2013](#)).

Within this process of change in the media ecology, local newspapers still play a crucial role in helping people feel connected to their communities through providing relevant news by adhering to the national news agenda of large national newspapers ([Enli & Syvertsen, 2016](#)).

This 'integration' is most often conducted through the use of visual tools or sources. Representation in images and research on moving and non-moving images in television news has shown how visual texts in television news 'reconstruct social reality and reproduce shared ideologies and cultural values', even in emergency contexts.

The amount of information and data we are exposed to on a daily basis can seem overwhelming. We know how when faced with statistics on global pandemics, the impact of climate change or election results, we often need help making sense of the finer details. Visual journalism can transform complex concepts and stories into accessible and engaging narratives and encourage us not only to keep reading, but also to share information with other connected audiences inside or outside the crisis.

## 3. Methodological Notes

The use of photo news in emergency and media contexts is not a recent novelty in the world of social research.

This practice returns to the interest of scholars and communication professionals when it finds ample space in the digital environment, on institutional sites first and on social channels more recently, but above all in the archives of the main mass media. In fact, photo news seems particularly suited to activating the response of its recipients and fostering their involvement ([Lovari & Righetti, 2020](#)) as it is able to activate the engine of memory and emotions; at the same time, it is in this same environment that the risks of information overload are highest and most widespread. And it is in this aspect that photo news helps journalism and the public

to 'fix' in both history and institutional practices those practices that are useful for planning interventions by anticipating future natural disasters (Lee et al., 2020).

This is why numerous scholars on disaster journalism and crisis management dwell on the effectiveness and design of news because, while they facilitate and enable the understanding of a content, they also risk oversimplifying and trivialising the topics covered or pander to the risks of misinformation. But it is impossible, over time, to not consider their social-historical narrative value. The sociographic effort of this paper lies in trying to highlight common and different points of visual narratives of disasters between the Italian cases of the 20th century and the more recent ones of 2024 covered by the Italian local media. In this specific case, through a search in the main Italian media archives, images were collected, selected and analysed that have a historical documentary value for cities that were victims of disasters in specific historical periods. The photographs identified and the sociographic analysis proposed in the paper represent an attempt to reconstruct a social media memory of Italian disasters, based on official sources pre-selected by the same media, more or less recently, that decided to narrate them. The analysis of past and current disasters allows us to identify possible recurring frames, emerging journalistic logics and possible errors of spectacularisation.

### *The Importance of Sociography*

This research is an exploratory journey into the issues of disaster journalism through a sociographic approach that involves the socio-historical categorisation and description of significant Italian disasters recounted by the local media using 10 archive images.

The approach used is that of the sociography of visual journalism. The idea of a 'sociography' of journalism first recalls the term 'sociography', a word coined by the Dutch sociologist Sebald Rudolf Steinmetz in 1913 (Taekke, 2004).

By 'sociography', we mean a 'free' form of writing about society, social subdivisions and existing cultural patterns; in our specific case, we refer to the 'transformative' power of the media and journalistic work consisting of routines, interactions and relationships between individuals/groups involved in the production of news, together with organisations, institutions, structures, professional norms and values (Taekke, 2004).

We speak, therefore, of a form of descriptive (scientific) narrative generally performed with the use of parameters and categories; in this case, both typical of sociological research and visual.

But it is not, in this case, simply a matter of describing phenomena and behaviour, but rather of incorporating visual data and social media theories into an applied study of the field of journalism and communication practices, going beyond the manualistic style of academic language.

The method lies in the telling of the social through images, not so much the media analysis of embedded photos.

In this sense, sociography thus offers spaces for new sensitivities, unresolved or incomplete topics and multiple, multidimensional and multiplying possibilities, in order to write and learn about the social in a different way that is also more accessible to the scientific public.

Groenman (1948) argued that sociology tends to generalise, while sociography studies do so in particular. As an 'individualising sociology', sociography focuses on concrete situations, specific areas of relationships and groups.

In this article, the (social) narrative will mainly concern the photographic account of natural disasters in Italy by the media and journalists, with a critical interdisciplinary look between history and social prediction.

It is therefore not a question of analysing and obtaining research results from this collection. It is rather a matter of observing, tracing, identifying and fixing the frames, i.e., the recurring visual narrative patterns, typical of disaster journalism in Italy.

Three 'media dimensions' have been identified in this regard:

- Ecological gaze: the transformation of natural and urban contexts;
- Impotence: the force of nature against the technique of the individual;
- Fine: the disaster that 'kills' public life, breaks the desire for collectivity and induces the death of the community, which after the disaster the latter of which can only be imagined (if not rebuilt).

#### 4. Inside the Italian Media Archives

Almost every year in Italy there are floods that cause casualties.

These are not recent phenomena, although they are currently on the increase. But there have been first-time, historical moments of natural disasters that have led to many victims and have forced the local and national media to review and reorganise their practices and tools for reporting emergencies (Buoncompagni, 2024).

The following will describe and show the fragments of social realities that made news and their sociographic description through images and historical–geographical information. At the end, some sociological considerations will be included in relation to the journalistic production of disasters, with a particular focus on Italy.

##### 4.1. A Look at the Disasters of the 20th Century

In 1954, over 300 people died in Campania. In Sarno, in 1998, around 160 also died. And then there are the cases of Tuscany and Triveneto, Calabria, Polesine, Piedmont and Amalfi (Figures 1 and 2).

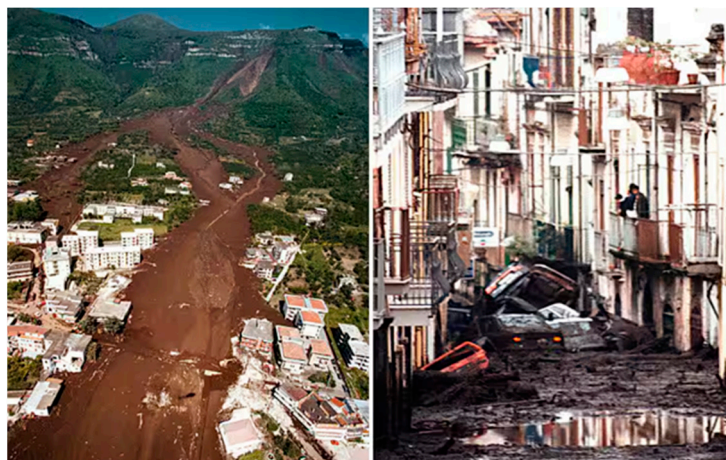


**Figure 1.** Campania-Toscana. Source: Skytg 24.

The most recent flood that claimed the most victims in Italy dates back to 1954. On 25 and 26 October, a part of Campania, from the Amalfi coast to Salerno, ended up submerged by water and mud; there were overflows, landslides, sinkholes, collapsed bridges, destroyed roads and railways. In addition to the provincial capital, the most critical situations were in Vietri sul Mare, Cava de' Tirreni, Maiori, Minori and Tramonti. The dead, according to the Civil Protection, numbered 303, with more than 5000 citizens made homeless. Over ITL 45 billion of damage was caused.

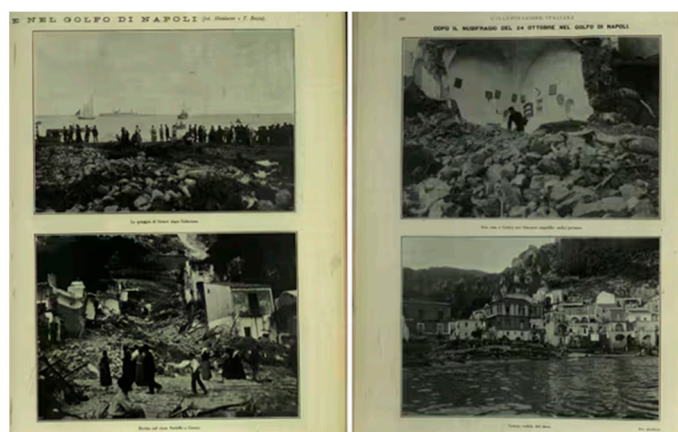
On 5 May 1998, some towns in Campania became infamous throughout Italy; these were Sarno, Quindici, Siano and Bracigliano. A flood caused 160 deaths, with rain, land-

slides and mud everywhere. The mountain vomited tongues of mud and the flow spared nothing: people, houses, a hospital, schools. Sarno, with 137 victims and around 200 houses destroyed, was the worst hit town. In the streets, debris reached a height of more than 5 m. The hamlet of Episcopio was completely buried (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Campania. Source: Ansa.

On 24 October 1910, 150 people died between Salerno, Cetara and Casamicciola on the island of Ischia. In issue 45 of *'L' Illustrazione Italiana'*, dated 6 November, there is mention of a "frightful hurricane", which "transformed the overhanging hills into unstoppable muddy torrents, made the boulders fall, ripped through the wretched old houses, swept away robe and creatures" (Credits: Rome, Biblioteca di Storia moderna e contemporanea. By concession of the Ministry of Cultural Activities and Tourism) (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Isola di Ischia. Source: Skytg 24.

When one speaks of the November 1966 flood, one usually thinks of the one that flooded Florence (photo) between the 3rd and 4th. But, apart from Tuscany, other areas in the north were devastated, especially Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Veneto and Trentino Alto Adige. The total number of victims was 118 and at least 78,000 were displaced. Around ITL one thousand billion was the damage estimate. Landslides and flooding were recorded, with roads and houses destroyed. In Venice, the water level reached a record high of 194 cm (Figure 4).

'Over 100 dead, billions in damage, crops destroyed, villages devastated, hundreds of houses collapsed, entire regions blocked for several days. These are the fatal effects of the storm that hit the islands and Calabria': This was the front page of *"L'Unità"* on 23

October 1951. From the 14th to the 19th, a flood devastated Calabria, Sicily and Sardinia. The dead numbered 110 (Credits: Rome, Library of Modern and Contemporary History. By concession of the Ministry of Cultural Activities and Tourism) (Figure 5).



Figure 4. Firenze (Toscana). Source: IPA.



Figure 5. Calabria. Source: SKytg24/Unità.

The Polesine flood of 14 November 1951 also claimed one hundred lives. More than 180,000 were made homeless. After days of rain, the Po broke its left bank in the late afternoon and millions of cubic metres of water poured into the countryside. Above all, the territories of the province of Rovigo were most affected, and, in part, of Venice. Occhiobello was the worst hit municipality. Thousands of people lost their homes and all their possessions, and the economy of the entire region was compromised (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Veneto-Piemonte. Source: IPA.

Between 2 and 3 November 1968, there was a flood in Piedmont, particularly affecting the provinces of Biella and Asti. The rains swelled rivers and tributaries, and mud and

debris came down from the mountains. There were 74 victims, most of them in the Strona Valley in Mosso. Many were found some time later, kilometres away. Some spools of the wool mills in the area were found in Vercelli. Several towns were flooded, with businesses and buildings destroyed: hundreds of people lost their homes and jobs. The damage was estimated at around ITL 30 billion (Figure 6).

In floods, nature's fury and man's faults are mixed: climate change, poor prevention attempts, building speculation and the covering of land with cement. Other events, not considered floods, have caused even more victims. This was the case in Vajont, on 9 October 1963, where almost 2000 people died. This was a disaster of anthropic rather than natural origin, where a dam was built in a geologically unstable area; a landslide, on a day without rain, broke away from Monte Toc, which in Friulian dialect means 'rotten' (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Source: Ansa.

#### 4.2. Disasters 2023–2024

Recently, as mentioned above, northern and central Italy have been hit by powerful floods, creating very serious hydrogeological disasters with many citizens displaced for months. The years 2023–2024 were and still are critical years, especially for Italian regions such as Tuscany and Emilia Romagna (ISPRA, 2023).

Since 15 May 2023, the region of Emilia-Romagna in particular has been hit by unprecedented floods and landslides that have left 17 people dead and over 25,000 displaced. The findings of Italian research highlight the role of social and institutional mediation, rather than mere dissemination, played by the local press in emergency situations. Accustomed by now to spectacularisation and information overload, local journalism seems instead to be a central element in the construction of a community bond, precisely in moments of insecurity and disorientation (Buoncompagni, 2024).

Investigating within the media archives themselves, the forms and formats of visual material change, but as can be seen, the ecological, social and disaster narrative remains very similar (Figure 8).

What has obviously changed is the participation of citizens in reporting disasters, instant information and the impact of digital communication on the narrative techniques of mainstream and local journalism.

Thus, there are changes in the way that the information flow of emergency journalism is hosted in space and time.

Despite the fact that local newsrooms, as well as all news agencies, now operate with reduced margins and are forced to cope with changing news consumption habits and the shift from print to online news, which reduces the functioning of existing business models and the desirability of existing information products and services, it is in these situations of social and informational disorder that the centrality of territory-based journalism is revealed.



**Figure 8.** Romagna. Source: Forli today; Toscana Firenze today; Ansa.

## 5. Critical Considerations

News agencies alone can no longer do all the work of ‘whipping news into shape’ and intervening by verifying its veracity, just as they cannot post dozens of up-to-date articles online and, at the same time, work with the pace of print media in the newsroom (Comunello & Mulargia, 2018).

The dynamic therefore imposed by the medium and the new digital environment makes it necessary in many cases to be essential, brief, dry and telegraphic (Schudson, 2013). The consequence, as the interviewees themselves recognise, is the dissemination of fragments of information, produced in a wide variety of ways and distributed widely thanks to the reticular developments structured by platforms and algorithms.

The choice of format affects not only the quantity of news published, but also the identity of the individual local newspaper and the quality of its relationship with its audience.

A ‘historical’, ‘known’, ‘loyal’ and ‘close’ is an audience that buys and reads the news, as far as the printed local newspaper is concerned; an unfamiliar, varied and ‘distant’ audience, is one that uses the digital version of the same newspaper in an uncritical and inattentive manner, and comments on the piece without knowing the subject matter.

But in emergencies, there is a growing need for information to be available so that the inhabitants of the affected territories can better trace it. The broadcasting of news about a violent natural event is no longer a ‘simple reproduction’, but rather a representation with precise linguistic-narrative codes that meets the expectations of the public, which in turn, expresses the need for an interpretative key to extraordinary events, for which it is unable to account.

According to Lombardi (2006), when unexpected disasters occur, contemporary media have, on the one hand, the important function of updating the population in real time through digital channels and, on the other hand, the possibility of extending the narrative by communicating the data or details of the event through traditional media. This balancing act has to do with the organisational effectiveness of the local newsroom and the right choice of medium that journalists decide to use during the ‘life cycle’ of the disaster.

The selection and verification of news becomes increasingly difficult during the early stages of the emergency and the risk is to oscillate between uncontrolled overdoses of information and moments of information blackout. Moreover, after the first reports, newsrooms try to reconstitute roles and tasks, circumscribe and specify the extent of the event, monitor all communication channels and at the same time begin to contact the bodies—such as the civil protection, carabinieri, technical and scientific organisations—whose expertise may be affected, and then verify and report on them in the field.

At this point, photo news becomes a bridging medium that generates balance and reduces the risk of confusion and misinformation. Well-designed visual languages have the power to convey health messages clearly and effectively to non-experts, including journalists, patients and politicians. Otherwise, they can confuse and alienate recipients, undermining the meaning of the message and leaving room for conflict, mistrust and pseudoscience.

## 6. Conclusions

In global emergencies, without economic aid in the long to medium term, the losses that community media suffer could have a profoundly negative impact on the information of (and for) the community. Without a vibrant local news industry, there is a risk that public institutions will act less responsibly and transparently in the exercise of their offices than they would in a situation of social stability (Lombardi, 2006; De Vincentiis, 2018).

Moreover, during a geographically small, or larger, emergency, there is hardly ever a general narrative of events. Instead, there is a myriad of narratives that need to be contextualised and explained to different communities.

And it is in these situations of social and informational disarray that the centrality of local journalism is revealed, as news agencies alone cannot do all the work of 'shaping' the news and intervening by verifying its veracity, just as they cannot post an article online and, at the same time, work with the times of the printed paper in the newsroom (Greenberg & Scanlon, 2016).

The effort must be shared at local and national levels, integrating editorial and online work with field observation, in contact with the different communities of reference that are able to explain what is happening, thus integrating the journalist's point of view. The goal is not only to investigate the consequences of a disaster, or to record the damage, but to collect and tell people's moods and to extend a certain critical gaze on reality, which journalism should report on a daily basis.

And the photo news of yesterday and today, in this sense, can make a significant social, historical and cultural contribution.

Visual journalism encapsulates the narrative technique of "show, don't tell". Not only does it appear much more captivating than walls of text, but it also takes advantage of a serious cognitive advantage: humans are visual creatures and about half of our brain is involved in visual processing.

Good visual journalism can give the audience an immediate and profound impression, cutting through the weight of a convoluted story to reach the crux of the issue.

Although the world of news and media was the first to use the power of visual journalism, it did not take long for digital marketers to notice it and today visual journalism is used for brand marketing as well as for reporting. Whatever the real purpose of visual journalism, it is an excellent way to transform complex information into captivating, clear and accessible stories, respecting the victims and the contexts affected.

As partly mentioned, the role of visual information must be to synthesise the various social and cultural policies to deal with an emergency proposed by public bodies and the correct representation of the condition of citizens' lives in the territory, going beyond the logic based on speed and the spectacularisation of disasters. As well highlighted by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001), citizens have an "innate need" to know what happens beyond their direct experience, to be aware of events that involve them or that do not happen before their eyes.

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