

Allies or Antagonists? The relationship between journalists and public communicators in risks and natural disasters *

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The article investigates the complex relationships between public communicators and journalists in the coverage of risks and natural disasters in Sardinia and Sicily, two Italian islands. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of public relations and public sector communication, the manuscript presents findings from a qualitative study based on in-depth semi-structured interviews. Findings highlight a hybrid relational model in which institutional procedures intertwine with informal practices during these emergency situations. Although collaboration is perceived necessary by both professionals, it is hindered by bureaucratic constraints, journalistic routines, algorithmic and public pressures. Spectacularization and news sensationalism influence the relationship, raising ethical risks in a contemporary digital ecosystem marked by visibility and disinformation. In this context, journalists and public communicators emerge not as antagonists nor as fully aligned partners, but as imperfect allies jointly responsible for producing reliable and timely information to face risks and natural disasters, essential to supporting vulnerable territories, such as insular contexts.

Keywords: public communicators, journalists, natural disasters, risk communication, insularity

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Introduction

Over the past decades, scholarly attention to the concept of risk has grown considerably (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992), unfolding in different sectors and disciplines including communication and media research (Covello, Slovic & Winterfeld, 1986; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2024). This development reflects not only this increasing centrality of the concept in academia but also the broadening range of phenomena classified as risks, involving different types of stakeholders, including citizens and the media. The majority of these risks are today deeply mediatized (Hepp, 2019), due to the growing media attention and the role of digital platforms in contemporary communication ecologies. In this scenario public sector organizations play a crucial role in risk prevention, as well as in disaster and crisis communication management (Coman, Gregor & Lilliker, 2025; Coombs, 2020, Comunello & Mulargia, 2018) to inform citizens amid a cacophony of messages often polluted by disinformation (OECD, 2021).

Institutions need to relate with media and journalists who play a pivotal role in shaping public opinion agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and in the social amplification of risks (Kasperson et al., 1988). Different stakeholders' perception, specific territorial vulnerabilities, and citizens' information seeking practices require multidisciplinary approaches and integrated communication strategies in risk communication (Lovari & Ducci, 2022; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2024).

In this framework, the article investigates the complex relationship between public communicators and journalists in prevention and in the coverage of risks and natural disasters in Sardinia and Sicily, two Italian regions. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of public relations and public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019), the manuscript presents findings from a qualitative study conducted with in-depth semi-structured interviews¹.

Literature review

The sociology of risk (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999) highlights that modernity is characterized by a progressive shift from natural danger to reflexive risk that is, a form of risk generated or amplified by the very social and technological practices designed to control it. Alongside the several dimensions that characterize the concept of risk, communication is being considered as one of the most crucial ones (Heath & O'Hair, 2009). Indeed, the increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, exacerbated by climate crises, have made risk communication a crucial dimension of contemporary society, for understanding persistent and emerging problems that occur in different part of the world (Diers-Lawson & Meißner, 2021; Massa & Comunello, 2024). The impacts of climate change, which are distributed unequally across the world, have become clearly visible through floods, droughts, wildfires, heat waves and sea level rise (Reyes et al.,

2021), and are strongly shaping how public sector organizations communicate with citizens and the media and their relationships (World Economic Forum, 2024).

The different forms of citizens' response are closely linked to risk and emergency communication management by government and public sector organizations (i.e., regions, municipalities, civil protections), whose legitimacy depends on trust in institutions (OECD, 2021). Public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019) is the leverage to transparently inform and actively engage multiple stakeholders in local territories also during uncertain situations and critical events that can harm different publics (Lovari, D'Ambrosi & Bowen, 2020). Indeed, in an era characterized by mega crises and mega risks (Sellnow-Richmond & Lukacovic, 2025), as well as by the proliferation of digital platforms, the challenge therefore lies not only in communicating risk, but in nurturing intangible assets, like trust, legitimacy and social capital around its management (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019). Thus, when risks turn into disasters and emergencies, communicative effectiveness is influenced by the ability of institutions and their communicators to maintain an ongoing dialogue with media and citizens, acknowledging the plurality of knowledge and the narrative dimension of collective safety, while integrating digital communication tools to foster civic engagement and enable digital volunteerism (Comunello, 2014; Lovari & Ducci, 2022; Smith et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have highlighted the important role of media and media coverage in informing citizens about natural risks, playing a central function in shaping public perception of these issues (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Carvalho & Burgess, 2005), in providing information that can prevent disasters (Buoncompagni, 2024; Öhman et al., 2016; Olofsson et al., 2016), or in expanding citizens' opportunities to participate in news production related to local emergencies (Farinosi, 2020). The media primary function is to insert these issues on citizens' agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), to ensure timely and reliable information, while helping to prevent dysfunctional behaviors. At the same time several authors have highlighted how the media convey frames (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) that can influence disasters' news production and the public's perception of these events (Altheide, 1997; Horsley, 2016; Houston, Pfefferbaum & Rosenholtz, 2012). Moreover, they contribute to the emotional dimensions of collective interpretation, often generating moral panic or assigning responsibility without addressing the structural conditions that produce vulnerability (Nogami, 2018; Tierney, Beve & Kuligowsky, 2006).

Depending on the frames used, mass media shape the social perception of risks and disasters and may act as amplification stations within the social imaginary of risk (Coombs, 2013; Luhmann, 1996). For instance, several authors have revealed that media representations of floods tend to privilege the dramatic and event-centred aspects of disaster coverage, while marginalising the systemic and infrastructural weaknesses that amplify such events or their prevention (Miller & Goidel, 2009; Stock, 2007; Zaheer, 2016).

Indeed, journalism is frequently criticized for its tendency toward news sensationalism, spectacularization, or dramatization of news. The terms denote the media's inclination to narrate events in a heightened, emotionally charged, or dramatized manner, emphasizing

the most affective, tragic, emotional or contentious elements to capture and keep public attention (Grabe, Zhuo & Barnett 2010; Sorrentino 2025; Wang & Cohen, 2009). In the context of severe emergencies resulting from natural disasters, the effects of such sensationalism often materialize through high-impact images and catching headlines, the use of myths and heroes (Nogami, 2018), the militarization of journalistic discourse (Horsley 2016), wherein the lexicon of “battle” and “resistance” functions as a means of collective mobilization (Mazzoleni, 2017).

Furthermore, in emergency contexts, the media also play a fundamental role through their watchdog function (Miller & Goidel, 2009; Norris, 2014), monitoring public institutions’ actions and highlighting any inefficiencies in the management of risks and emergencies (Houston et al., 2012). This journalistic oversight is essential to ensure greater transparency and accountability by governments and local authorities (Horsley, 2016). This function is also expressed in the media coverage using a responsibility frame (Kuppuswamy, 2017) when the narrative refers to the importance of the responsibility of politics and local institutions in the event of large-scale natural disasters (Albrecht, 2022; Lovari et al., 2025).

Communicators and journalists: allies or antagonists?

Scholarly literature has long documented the complex and often ambivalent relationship between journalists and communication professionals, particularly those managing media relations, in public and private organizations (Bulicanu, 2022; Supa & Zoch, 2009). While these actors may pursue divergent goals, their interaction remains largely symbiotic and mutually beneficial, grounded in the reciprocal exchange of information (Currah, 2009; Gandy, 1982). Yet, the persistence of journalistic norms of autonomy and independence from external influence (Gans, 1979; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014) often positions organizational communicators as potential constraints on journalistic inquiry and the pursuit of truth. Consequently, several authors have characterized this interaction as a “love-hate relationship” (Graber, 2003; Harcup, 2009), a process that intertwines the organizations’ need to increase their visibility and the newsmaking practices tending to emphasize organizational dysfunctions or crises. This scenario is today complexified by the presence of new digital arenas and by the role of digital influencers in the process of agenda setting (Badham & Luoma-aho, 2025).

Within the public sector, this relationship gains additional complexity due to ongoing processes of mediatization and the disintermediating effects of Web 2.0 technologies (Lovari & Ducci 2022). These developments have significantly reconfigured public sector communication practices and professional boundaries within institutions, as well as the relationships with journalists and citizens (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; Solito, Pezzoli & Materassi, 2019; Solito & Sorrentino, 2023). These dynamics extend beyond ordinary

contexts, shaping public information flows and power relations during emergencies and natural disasters giving such events, and their management, an additional digital visibility.

Public relations and communication research have examined the role of media and journalists in their relationships with public communicators - as well as with emergency managers and public information officers - during risk and emergency communication management (Horsley, 2016; Sellnow & Sellnow, 2024; Veil, 2012). In particular during a disaster the goals of journalists and public information professionals should be aligned to favor public outreach and great access to information in these critical situations (Fischer, 2008). The main common goal is to deliver vital information to the public (Veil, 2012). In general, the media cannot always satisfy the public sector communication needs of emergency management or prevention, and communicators are not always able to satisfy the information requests or the pressing deadlines of journalists (Fischer, 2008). Indeed, if public communicators are not ready when journalists contact them, or they are absent from the coverage of an emergency, their institutions may look unresponsive, untransparent and evasive toward the community needs (Veil, 2012). As stated by Miller and Goidel (2009, p. 267), "it is difficult to imagine government effectively responding to a natural disaster in the absence of news organizations reporting on breaking events".

The relationship between these two roles depends on several factors - professional, organizational and cultural ones - related to the development of different routines and models of journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2012; Sorrentino, 2025), as well as to the level of professionalization of public sector communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; OECD, 2021) also in risk and crisis management (Lovari, 2025). Scholars pointed out how media still depends on information subsidies from risk and disasters response communicators to provide updates and leads for their ongoing news coverage (Horsley, 2016), even if the growing role of digital platforms has enabled citizens to livestream these events, or to provide information, videos and photos of the disasters directly to the media, bypassing emergency managers or public information officers. This fact can lead to the proliferation of misleading information or unofficial contents that risk being integrated in the news coverage, thus requiring communicators to monitor digital platforms and media for detecting rumors, inaccuracies or false messages that need to be immediately rectified in these critical situations (Lovari & Bowen, 2020).

The adversarial relationship between journalists and public communicators has long been identified as a recurring theme in public relations and emergency management scholarship (Faccioli, 2000; Fischer, 2008; Garner, 1984), highlighting the stereotypical judgments, lack of trust and unrealistic expectations between these two professional roles (Veil, 2012). On one side emergency sources (like governments, public communicators or emergency managers) often criticize the sensationalism and deficiencies of news coverage of disasters; on the other side journalists argue that a deficient media coverage depends mostly on lack of access to information by emergency sources (Grassau, Valenzuela & Puente, 2021). But media frames of disaster are unavoidable, often they are routinely adopted, and communicators should be "cognizant of prevailing frames in a

disaster so that rumors, misinformation and missing information may quickly be remedied” (Horsley, 2016, p.163).

Scholars have argued that one of the most effective strategies to mitigate this tension is to integrate the media throughout all phases of risk and disaster management, from preparedness to recovery and evaluation. Such integration not only enhances media relations but also fosters a mutual understanding of the distinct, yet interdependent roles journalists and communicators play during crises (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). Moreover, strengthened collaboration with the media may improve the visibility of preparedness, mitigation, and resilience, issues that are frequently underrepresented in disaster journalism (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012) but represent strategic themes for risk communication in public sector organizations (Lombardi & Burato, 2017). Furthermore, strategies aimed at improving the relationship and mutual trust between journalists and public communicators should focus on the development of interpersonal relationships, a deeper mutual understanding of respective professional roles, and the adoption of transparent, consistent and ethically grounded communication practices both in ordinary and in critical situations (Lovari & Bowen, 2020; Veil, 2012).

Focusing on the Italian context, a growing body of scholarship has investigated the evolution of risk and emergency communication during natural disasters, examining the roles and interactions of multiple stakeholders (e.g., Baldino et al., 2024; Cerase, 2017; Farinosi & Micalizzi, 2013; Sturloni, 2018). One of the first studies, coordinated by Comunello (2014), revealed the different practices of citizens’ digital volunteerism (Smith et al., 2021), enabled by the increasing prominence of social media, in response to the interventions of local institutions during the 2012 Emilia earthquake and the 2013 flood in Sardinia. Within the scope of social media’s impact, Comunello and Mulargia (2017), focusing on regional and local level administrations, have identified several barriers for an effective use of these platforms during natural disasters: the informal nature of social media collides with institutional bureaucracy, influencing the speed and quality of digital public communication in these critical situations.

Although digital media are growing in importance in citizens' consumption patterns, traditional media retain a crucial role as trusted intermediaries in the public’s understanding of risks and emergencies. A recent Eurobarometer (2024) reported that more than half of Italian respondents (52%) would rely on national media outlets to get information about disaster-related risks. About 42% prefer to seek information on local or regional media, or via official emergency management bodies such as the *Civil Protection Department, State Police, or Fire and Rescue Services* (31%). Public and governmental institutions follow, with 25% of respondents turning to public communication channels, while 22% reported using social media platforms as a source of information.

Focusing on the role of traditional media, Buoncompagni (2024) analyzed the role of journalists on the heavy floods that impacted Tuscany in 2023. The study highlighted the function of proximity of journalism, and in particular the important role played by local press to promote community resilience during the disaster. Conducting several focus

groups with journalists who covered the event, he pointed out how local media decided to give space to public sector communication - “from the press releases published online by the civil protection services to the contributions of the mayors, from the infographic to the messages published on the websites” (Buoncompagni, 2024, p.5) - to control the noise of information and disinformation. Furthermore, Monaco (2025), investigating the media coverage of newspaper articles published between 2020 and 2024 related to a severe coastal storm surge striking Naples, highlighted limitations of media-driven risk communication, the need for more inclusive narratives, and a general focus on exceptionalism that fails to incorporate forward-looking discussions on mitigation strategies and climate adaptation.

In this context, limited attention - at least within the Italian scholarly landscape - has been devoted to examining the relationship between journalists and public communicators during risk and natural disasters from both points of view, investigating the characteristics of their interactions, practices and mutual expectations. This article aims to partially address this gap through a qualitative study involving journalists and public sector professionals working in insular contexts, an area that remains largely underexplored within international research on risk communication (Diers-Lawson & Meißner, 2021).

Research questions and methodology

This article presents findings from a qualitative study conducted within the national research project PRIN 2022 PNRR INSULANDER that investigates risk communication management in Sardinia and Sicily, two Italian regions and insular territories. Ivčević et al. (2021: 1) noted for the southern Mediterranean regions that different societies “sharing a similar environment may face similar natural hazards but might not necessarily have the same level of risk awareness. They might not share a common understanding of that risk”, may have different levels of anxiety, differ in urbanization levels and consequently may need different communication strategies. Thus, insularity is considered an additional factor of fragility and vulnerability that significantly affects the construction of risk perception and impact on communication strategies and practices (Gelabert, Micallef & Rossello Geli, 2020). Focusing on Italian islands, ISTAT (2024) reports that the maximum number of consecutive dry days (≤ 1 mm of rainfall) reached 44 in Sicily and 52 in Sardinia, compared with a national average of 27. Such climatic conditions exacerbate wildfire risk, as shown by the higher rate of burned forest area per 1,000 km² in the islands in comparison with the national average. The two Italian regions are also severely exposed to the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and soil aridity.

In this context, this study aims to identify the main elements characterizing the relationship between public communicators and journalists reconstructing, from both

perspectives, the informative routines and the organizational and operational challenges adopted in communicating risks and natural disasters in Sardinia and Sicily.

In particular two research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How is the relationship between journalists and public communication professionals in situations of risk and natural disasters? What are the main dimensions that characterize this relationship?

RQ2: How is the spectacularization of news about risks and natural disasters perceived by journalists and public communicators?

In order to investigate these topic in-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out with public communicators and journalists operating in these insular contexts. Two semi-structured interview guides (Knott et al., 2022) were created integrating risk and disaster communication, journalism and public sector communication theories. They reported specific sessions related to the characteristics of the two professions and included common issues to compare the different perspectives on specific themes (i.e. risk communication, insularity, newsmaking, mutual relationship, artificial intelligence, etc.). Between April and June 2025, a total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams and Google Meet: 17 in Sardinia (9 communicators, 8 journalists) and 10 in Sicily (6 communicators, 4 journalists).

The sampling procedures differed in relation to the professional profiles, adopting a snowball sampling (Bryman, 2016). For journalists, the selection was based on a mapping of regional media outlets and on a media coverage analysis previously conducted for the INSULANDER PRIN PNRR project activities (Milestone 2, see Baldino et al., 2024). This activity provided a list of journalists working for national, regional and local media who covered natural disasters in these two regions. For public communicators, the selection was carried out through official institutional channels, prioritizing professionals with specific responsibilities in risk communication management at regional and local levels (including Region of Sardinia, Civil Protection, several municipalities).

Interviews were transcribed using Microsoft Teams, but manual text cleaning was performed to ensure full fidelity to the original narratives. The corpus of interviews was subjected to a rigorous qualitative coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by the research team (the authors and two other researchers), aimed at identifying, classifying, and interpreting the main thematic categories emerging from the empirical material. In the first phase, a differentiated codebook was developed for each of the two professional groups under analysis. This methodological choice was motivated by the need to capture the lexical, experiential, and conceptual specificities distinctive of each profile, avoiding an interpretive homogenization between the two groups. At the same time several parts of the coding procedure (with related codes and subcodes) were the same in order to compare specific dimensions: this is the case of the public communicators-journalist's relations that is at the center of this article.

The textual material underwent a process of data reduction and coding assisted by the software NVivo 15, which allowed for a systematic and transparent management of the corpus, ensuring traceability of categories, recurrence of themes, and interconnections

among different codes. This process facilitated the comparison between the two professional groups, enabling a deeper understanding of the points of convergence and divergence emerging from their respective narratives. Interviews' excerpts reported in the next paragraph have been translated into English by the authors. Each quotation is accompanied by the interview number (from 1 to 9, the maximum number for each category), with the abbreviations J for journalists, C for communicators, Sar for Sardinia and Sic for Sicily².

Results and discussion

A multifaceted relationship

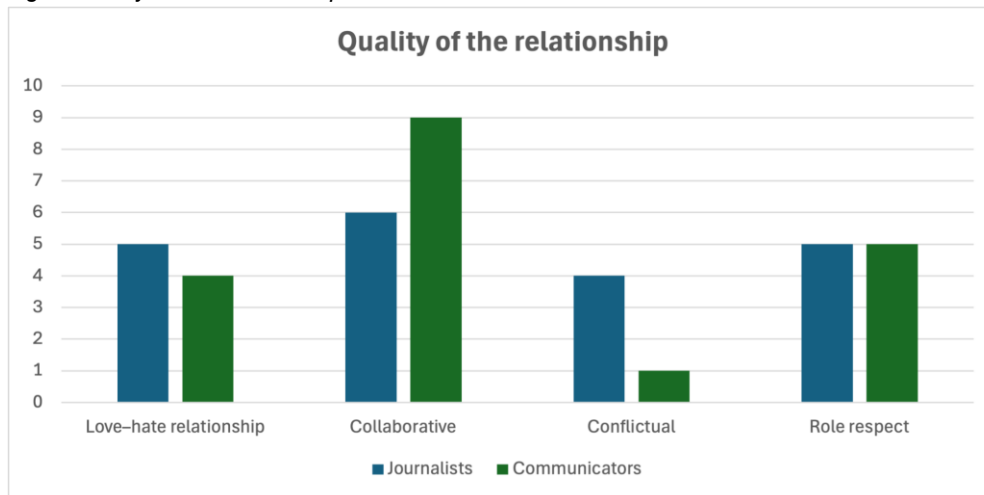
The analysis of the quality of the relationship between journalists and public communicators (RQ1) highlights an overall cooperative yet ambivalent situation (Fig.1). The prevailing perception is a functional collaborative relationship between the two communicative actors, often based on common interest and reciprocal trust (Veil, 2012), although elements of tension and mutual distrust persist and emerge as reported in these interview's excerpts:

We have specific contacts within the world of journalism people with whom, over time, we've built a relationship of trust and collaboration. Very often, when something happens, for example a wildfire, it's the journalist who reaches out to us directly: they might call and ask if any of our volunteers are on site, if they can interview them, or get some additional information. It's a direct, almost personal relationship that has developed and strengthened over the years. (11CSic)

Sometimes I tend to bypass them, but never out of disrespect. Of course, that can cause some tensions. They might say, 'why did you go directly to him instead of through me?' Yes, because sometimes, you know, asking a question directly has a different weight. And one question leads to another, depending on the answer I get, and the story may start one way but end up completely different. (05JSar)

The theme of collaboration emerges as the most recurrent (n.15), explicitly mentioned by six journalists and nine communicators. This indicates a shared representation of the relationship as oriented toward cooperation and dialogue. Both groups acknowledge the need for an interdependent relationship (Bulicanu, 2022) to ensure the timely and accurate circulation of information in situations of risk or natural emergency in the regional territories (Buoncompagni, 2024; Horsley, 2016). However, collaboration is often described as instrumental rather than based on consolidated trust, more an operational necessity dictated by urgency - the incoming risk or the emergency related to a disaster - than a stable, long-term relationship.

Fig. 1: Quality of the relationship



Alongside this, the presence of the code “love-hate” relationship, explicitly mentioned by 5 journalists and 4 communicators, highlights the relational ambivalence between media and institutions (Faccioli, 2000; Graber, 2003). Both professionals recognize a dual tension between cooperation and control, transparency and sensationalism, and information openness and strategic communication management. Journalists describe their relationship with press offices as one of selective trust, necessary to quickly access verified information, yet at the same time restrictive in terms of investigative freedom.

The conflictual theme, mentioned by four journalists and only one communicator, points to an asymmetry in perception. Journalists tend to identify sources of friction in the relationship, particularly when public communication appears overly controlled, downplayed or mediated by politicians’ control or internal bureaucracies. For instance:

It’s all about timing. News travels fast, it has a life of its own. I keep saying it: it’s pointless for them to tell us ‘we’re still verifying’ when, by that time, someone might already be dead, or the town might be underwater. When the Montiferru wildfire happened, I was the first to raise the alarm. I was on vacation, but from my house up on the hill I could see the fire front. I called right away, and they kept telling me, ‘we’re checking’. But no, I could see the flames, tall, huge flames, and they were still ‘verifying’. Not verifying the fire, verifying what to tell us. That’s why I say it’s definitely a problem. (04JSar)

On the other side, public communicators tend to moderate these tensions, offering a more conciliatory narrative to have an extensive media coverage in case of forthcoming risks, explaining the need to activate different levels of analysis within their institutions. This divergence reflects the distinct professional logics of the two groups: for journalists, an orientation toward newsworthiness and real-time responsiveness to alert local communities (Grassau, Valenzuela & Puente, 2021); for communicators, a focus on institutional legitimacy and the mitigation of reputational risk in case of natural disasters (Coombs, 2020; La Rocca & Lovari, 2024).

Furthermore, the code “role respect”, mentioned by five participants in each group, represents a point of balance in the mutual recognition of professional competences. Both

professionals emphasize the importance of maintaining clear professional boundaries between journalism and public sector communication, while acknowledging that in emergency situations these boundaries can become more flexible and permeable to prevent an incoming risk or alert the local population in case of unexpected floods or wildfires.

It's clear that we will always aim to communicate in a way that reassures people, while journalists will communicate to sell a story. That's a fundamental difference, and it cannot be changed. What we can do, though, is agree on how we use words. I believe we could develop a sort of shared vocabulary; one where we don't have to call something a catastrophe if it isn't, but rather a smaller-scale event. By fine-tuning our language and setting clearer boundaries between our roles, we could manage to understand each other, especially with the Journalists' Order. (08CSar)

From the interviews emerges how the type of relationship between journalists and public communicators is predominantly collective, although direct one-to-one interactions also persist. Seven communicators and four journalists described the relationship as collective, meaning that it is mediated through group-based online channels and traditional tools such as press conferences, mailing lists, events, or press briefing. This suggests that, in the communicators' narratives, the relationship is perceived as institutionalized and mediated by formal communicative practices, consistent with the role of media relation offices as representatives of public administrations. The collective dimension also aligns with the principles of transparency and equal access to public information - key principles of public communication (Canel & Luoma-aho, 2019; OECD, 2021) - even though communication is often more tightly controlled in cases of emergencies to prevent the spread of panic or misleading information (Lovari & Bowen, 2020).

At the same time, both journalists (3) and communicators (4) acknowledge the presence of personal and direct one-to-one relationships. These interactions, often developed over time, emerge as trust-based practices that enable faster and more flexible information exchange, particularly during emergencies, disasters or crises (Miller & Goidel, 2009). The coexistence of these two relationship types - collective and one-to-one - indicates a dynamic balance between formal roles and personal trust (Veil, 2012). On the one hand, collective relationships ensure uniformity in delivering institutional messages, fostering the traceability in public sector communication's strategies and practices, as reported in this interview:

When we developed the communication plan, we explicitly included this: an institutional channel through which information could be disseminated to everyone promptly and simultaneously. The communication started from the website, which remains the main institutional source, and from there we shared it on social media and through the broadcast list for press. (06CSar)

On the other, individual relationships perform as informal mechanisms of efficiency, grounded in relational networks built over time. In this scenario, journalists often contact

communicators directly to confirm details, and communicators rely on familiar journalists to guarantee responsible media coverage on risks or disasters affecting regional territories. These one-to-one contacts coexist with broader institutional mechanisms, providing flexibility during crises. The overall picture reflects a *structural hybridization in the relationship between journalists and public communicators*. Public communicators tend to privilege the collective dimension, consistent with the organizational culture of administrations and with the practical need to avoid repeating the same information to multiple journalists. Journalists, while participating in these dynamics, tend to value personal relationships more strongly, perceiving them as more effective for obtaining in-depth, timely information and ultimately, for getting the news or the story published.

Analyzing the time-based dimension of the relationship between journalists and public communicators, it emerges that is predominantly structured (10 out of 27), but with a significant discontinuous and intermittent component that reflects the type of expertise and work carried out within the editorial offices (whether journalists are specialized in risk/environment or in news topics), as well as the situational and cyclical nature of their interactions related to the occurrence of risks and natural disasters in the two islands. Most interviewees from both groups (5 journalists, 5 communicators) described the relationship as structured and ongoing, indicating *the presence of stable relational practices and communication channels developed over time*, often grounded in mutual trust or institutionalized procedures (Badham & Luoma-aho, 2025). These relationships are built on previous experiences (or previous disasters and natural emergencies) and maintained through dialogue, a constant mutual flow of information, which becomes particularly crucial in moments of crisis or risk management.

There is constant dialogue with those responsible for public risk communication. We regularly speak with the Regional Authority, the Regional Civil Protection Department - including the department's director - the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology, the relevant regional councilors, as well as the Police, Carabinieri, and the Financial Police. It's necessary, because we couldn't communicate anything unless it came from them first. (11JSic)

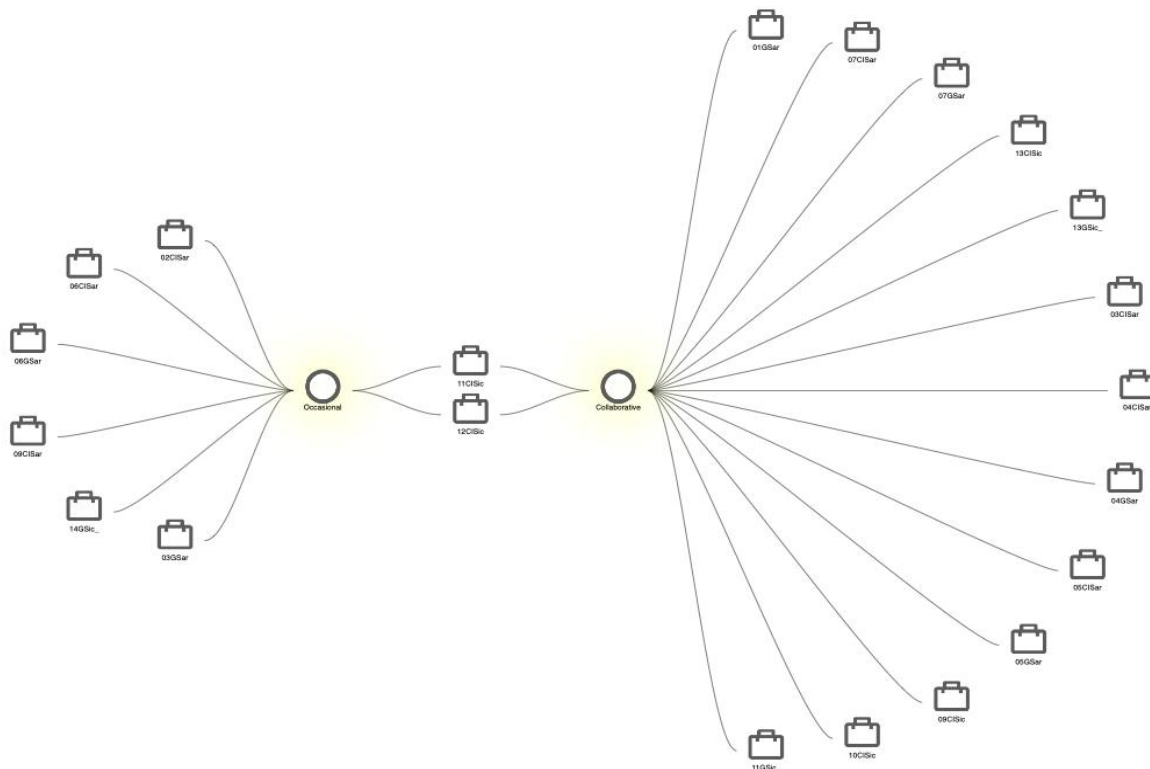
At the same time, three journalists and five communicators reported the relationship as occasional (8/27), activated mainly in specific situations such as public events (i.e., road shows, fairs), press conferences, and tending to diminish once those circumstances end. This suggests that, for part of the interviewees, collaboration is not based on relational continuity but rather on a logic of necessity (Gandy, 1982): communication occurs when needed, rather than as part of a stable or systematic relationship between the two professionals. On the other hand, some communicators specified that their digital channels are constantly updated, so the relationship with journalists is continuous even if mediated, but the manifestation of specific risks can enhance direct and tailored interaction. Finally, the marginal presence of the sub-code "absent" (one journalist and one communicator) indicates that the complete lack of a relationship is quite rare, yet it confirms the existence of cases of communicative isolation, likely associated with poor

disaster journalism in small local contexts (Houston, Pfefferbaum, & Rosenholtz, 2012) or limited professional experience in crisis communication and media relations in the regional institutions. For instance:

No, there isn't an institutional contact person for communication. There are the Civil Protection bulletins, but there isn't a proper communication flow designed for journalism. So, these relationships don't exist as formal channels. Let's say we rely on the bulletins. (10JSic)

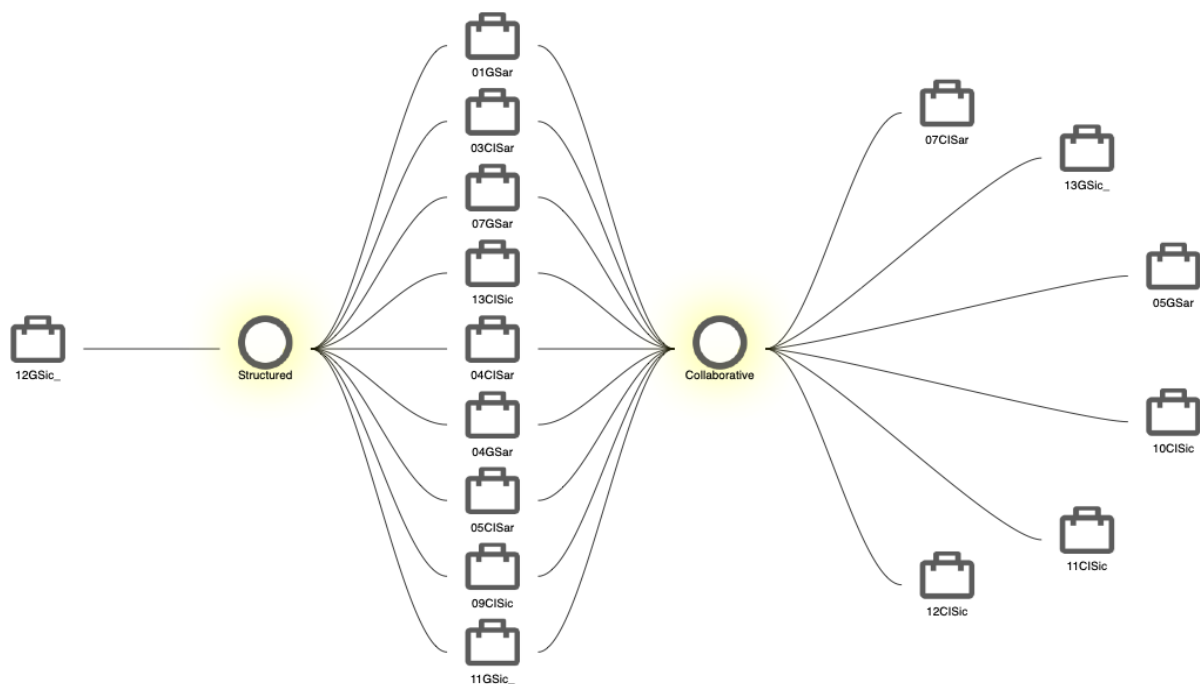
As previously reported, most interviewees describe the relationship between public communicators and journalists as predominantly collaborative, with some exceptions where collaboration is perceived as sporadic, unstructured, or limited to unforeseen risks and emergency situations. Using NVivo 15 to compare subcodes related to temporal dimension (occasional, structured, absent) and the quality of the relationship (collaborative, conflictual, love and hate, without rules, respect of the roles), it can be noticed a partial connection between the two sub-code codes "occasional" and "collaborative" (Fig.2), reflecting a conceptual continuum: collaboration is not binary (present/absent) but exists along a spectrum of stability. From a territorial perspective, the presence of both Sardinian and Sicilian cases in these categories suggests variability is not strongly regional but rather linked to organizational or individual differences.

Fig.2: Relationship between the subcodes "occasional" and "collaborative"



When consolidated, collaboration between journalists and communicators tends to evolve into a structured relationship, supported by routines, frequent contacts, and shared procedures and practices (e.g., mailing lists or joint training activities). This pattern is evident in most cases, as shown in Fig.3, which analyzes the relationship between the codes “structured” and “collaborative”. The temporal dimension and the quality of the relationship appear to be consistent: it is rare to find cases where a collaborative relationship is not also structured or, conversely, occasional. Only in one case was a collaborative tendency mentioned alongside criticism of “non-virtuous mayors” (03CSar) who showed little interest in nurturing media relations during natural disasters.

Fig.3: Relationship between the subcodes “structured” and “collaborative”



Furthermore, focusing the attention on the word “relationships” (in Italian *rapporto*) inside the interviews’ transcripts, a word tree was extracted with NVivo 15 (Fig.4), revealing a multifaceted representation of the relationship between journalists and public communicators in risky situations and natural disasters. The connections branching from the root term show that the concept is almost always contextualized in reference to collaboration, trust, and mutual dependency, nonetheless it also contains traces of conflict, asymmetry, and institutional distance. A large portion of the word tree links “rapporto” (relationship) with phrases such as “*di collaborazione*” (for collaboration), “*di fiducia*” (of trust), and “*di collaborazione costante*” (of continuous collaboration), indicating that most professionals view the relationship as functional and necessary for managing journalism and communication in risk and emergency contexts. This reinforces the idea that cooperation between the two actors is not optional or operational but a strategic requirement.

relationship as something dynamic, over time and in communicative practices, requiring active care to balance professional autonomy and public sector communication strategies to inform local territories and to foster accountability (Ducci & Lovari, 2021). Thus, the word tree reveals a relational structure that is collaborative but conditional, necessary yet negotiated, shaped by both organizational norms and personal trust dynamics.

News sensationalism in risk and disasters

Regarding RQ2, the thematic analysis highlights how news sensationalism (Italian code: spettacolarizzazione) is conceptualized by interviewees not as an intentional practice but as a structural drift within the contemporary media ecosystem. The related word tree (Fig.5) shows a semantic network in which sensationalism intertwines with words such as news, headline, image, story, and urgency, suggesting that the pressure for visibility and timeliness profoundly shapes how news is narrated, especially in contexts of risks and natural disasters.

Fig.5: Word Tree “sensationalism”



Interviewees often describe spectacularization of news as an inevitable side effect of contemporary hybrid media systems, where competition among media outlets, as well as

the pervasiveness of digital platforms and their algorithms push journalists to simplify complex information and emphasize the emotional and visual dimensions of all the events (Tierney et al., 2006). For instance:

It's clear that the impulse of sensationalism exists, it's real and it's hard to avoid, because it's viscerally connected to the event itself. It makes those who lose their homes, their jobs, or who find themselves living through severe hardship feel angry. In those moments, the newspaper becomes the spokesperson for that anger, for that outrage that's difficult to contain. Sensationalism sometimes stems precisely from this strong, uncontrollable emotion of the people experiencing these tragedies (14JSic)

This process is perceived as a professional constraint, as well as an ethical challenge that can have negative impact on citizens' perceptions and also on public sector communication interventions and credibility (Comunello & Mulargia, 2018; Lovari & Bowen, 2020). As reported in this excerpt:

They wrote a headline that was really dangerous. It said 'Fires between fiction and reality', and I told them to be careful, because Aunt Maria [name of fantasy] reading something like that would get scared, and that's not the message you should be sending. The road ahead is long and difficult, and a lot still needs to be done through training, relationship-building, and direct interaction with the media, because they have the power to convey information however they choose. And this isn't a chess tournament! (03CSar).

Several professionals - both communicators and journalists - explicitly connect this phenomenon to the transformation of journalistic routines: the replacement of traditional press conferences with real-time online updates, live broadcasting via digital platforms, and social media coverage has accelerated the production cycle and amplified the risk of sensationalism and the use of specific narratives (Sorrentino, 2025). These factors intertwine with factors like citizen prosumerism and citizen journalism (Farinosi, 2020), creating a potential competition that influences and accelerates journalistic routines and news production especially in emergency situations.

This issue of sensationalism is becoming increasingly serious. It's always been there, but with the advent of the web, the immediacy, smartphones, and the fact that everyone now has a camera, the whole dynamic has changed. The relationship has been reversed: with digital technology and smartphones, the public has become the witness. So today anyone can see how news events are documented directly by witnesses, who within seconds have already uploaded material that, until recently, would never have been seen. (08JSar)

Furthermore, news sensationalism is not merely a matter of emotions and exaggeration to attract attention (Grabe, Zhuo & Barnett 2010), but reflects a systemic condition of temporal compression, a need to report, interpret, and attract public opinion's attention almost simultaneously, also to increase media visibility and convey online traffic on social media accounts and on their websites. This is clearly reported by some communicators' interviews:

Sensationalism sells, that's the truth since people read it. They see that headline and click on the link, because most of the time they stop at the teaser or the title. But if there's even a chance, they'll open it, and you use something that grabs attention, especially something that appeals to the reader. We know that doing so increases the number of users online. (06CSar)

Yes, journalists...over the years, you learn how to manage them too, because of course they're always looking for sensational stories, for the person who shouts or stirs up controversy. But that's part of their job, and I always try not to overdo it when giving them information (05CSar)

At the same time, the recurrence of words such as “order”, “avoid”, “ethics”, and “rules” highlights a strong normative awareness. Many journalists consciously strive to resist the drift toward dramatization of news in case of risks and natural disasters, recalling professional codes promoting accuracy, moderation, and respect for the public's emotional vulnerability (Buoncompagni, 2024). As some interviewees noted, “no one is immune,” yet “it should be avoided,” emphasizing that news sensationalism represents a form of ethical deviation from professional standards that need to be responsibly respected. Communicators are fully aware of this process: during disasters there is the need of a constant dialogue with journalists to avoid this practice that could create panic in the population and can harm the efficacy of institutions' interventions and their reputation (Lovari, D'Ambrosi & Bowen, 2020).

The thematic analysis reveals a double tension: a) between speed and responsibility, and b) between engagement and restraint. This ambivalence mirrors the dual pressures experienced by journalists, to remain competitive within a fast-paced digital ecosystem while safeguarding credibility and trustworthiness.

Two main interpretive frames of news sensationalism can be distinguished:

- 1) Professional deviation: journalists view it as a professional misstep that undermines credibility, often resulting from emotional involvement, editorial pressure, or the urge to meet audience expectations. It is framed as an ethical issue that needs to be recognized and mediated in the relationship with communicators.
- 2) Systemic effect: rather than an individual choice, sensationalism emerges from structural transformations in communication and journalism production: the acceleration of news cycles, algorithmic visibility and click baiting, as well as the hybridization between public sector communication and social media logics.

Ultimately, these narratives reveal both resistance and resignation. Both professionals demonstrate critical awareness of the ethical and epistemic risks of dramatization of news, while they also acknowledge the difficulty of escaping a system logic that rewards speed, visibility, and emotions, also in public communication (Lovari, 2025). The theme highlights the need for communicators to perform environmental scanning for identification of media frames (Horsley, 2016), as well as the fragilities of journalism in the digital age (Solito & Sorrentino, 2023), suspended between the duty to inform and the spectacularization adopted even during natural disasters.

Conclusion: allies, antagonists or imperfect allies?

This article aimed to investigate the relationship between journalists and public communicators in situations of risk and natural disasters, as well as the perception of the spectacularization of these events in the insular contexts of Sardinia and Sicily. This relation is investigated in the different phases of risk communication, from prevention to emergency management related to natural disasters.

The relationship between journalists and public communicators in these two regions is marked by structural ambivalences (Bulicanu, 2022), exhibiting a hybrid and fluid relational model. This model integrates formalized procedures and institutional channels with direct and informal interactions, crucial for expediting information exchange, especially during emergencies. This hybridization appears to be a structural characteristic of risk communication in insular territories, where geographical proximity amplifies both the necessity for cooperation and the potential for local tensions (La Rocca & Lovari, 2024). Respect of roles and collaboration are recognized as central assets in risk and disaster communication, but they are influenced by bureaucratic procedures that collide with journalist news making routines, framing processes, and citizens' information practices (Comunello, 2014; Fischer, 2008; Smith et al., 2021).

Regarding the perception of news sensationalism, findings indicate a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, exacerbated by the digital media ecosystem's transformations, that today is increasingly problematized by AI, raising concerns of accountability, transparency, and disinformation that can be critical in these situations (Sellnow-Richmond & Lukacovic, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2024). Concurrently, there is an understanding that spectacularization is neither inevitable nor fully accepted; both professional groups appeal to high ethical standards and deontological norms (Bowen, 2024) to counteract sensationalistic tendencies, acknowledging its strong allure, but also its detrimental function. In this context, sensationalism can be understood not merely as an inevitable outcome of journalistic practices driven by platform-oriented business logics, but also as a terrain of mediation in which the relationship between the two professional communities can be constructed, negotiated, and redefined. This issue may offer opportunities for reflexivity - for instance through joint training initiatives as reported in several interviews - that can help establish a more balanced approach toward the public interest, particularly when natural hazards and extreme climate events manifest and should be responsively and timely communicated.

This study presents several limitations, partly influenced by the specific objectives of the INSULANDER research project. First, the decision to focus on selected dimensions of the relationship between journalists and public communicators did not allow for an in-depth exploration of other relevant aspects of the interviews, including the use of different communication tools and digital platforms, the problematic interactions with political actors and public administrators, and the implications of artificial intelligence for innovating risk communication practices. In addition, the unequal number of interviews

conducted in Sicily and Sardinia - largely due to difficulties in identifying and recruiting available contacts - may have affected the comparability of the two insular contexts. Future research will seek to further investigate the interconnections among these factors, with the aim of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping risk communication, institutional trust, and media–public sector relations in insular settings. Together this study offers relevant insights for its implications for risk and disaster communication, as it investigates points of convergences and tensions between the two professional groups from both sides using in-depth interviews. Greater synergy between journalists and public communicators - supported by respect of roles, shared protocols, continuous training, and conscious use of digital platforms - can reduce the risk of misinformation and strengthen the informational resilience of insular communities.

At the same time, from a theoretical and methodological perspective, the study underscores the importance of contextual and situated analyses that consider risk communication in territorial specificities, such as insularity (Diers-Lawson & Meißner, 2021; Ivčević et al., 2021). Risk communication emerges as a relational, negotiated, and multilayered process whose success depends on the quality of dialogue among communicators and journalists and on the degree of balance achieved among informational, organizational, and ethical dimensions, also built in previous interactions between these professional roles. More than antagonists or allies, journalists and communicators appear to be imperfect allies: called upon to co-construct reliable and timely public information for preventing risk and managing disasters, especially in highly vulnerable insular contexts. Strengthening this alliance, in the mutual respect of their role professional expertise and ethical standards, represents an essential condition for developing responsible and effective risk communication strategies to support the ability of local communities to understand and manage their own vulnerabilities.

Biographical notes

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Notes

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