



In the heat of the moment: A local narrative of the responses to a fire in Lærdal, Norway

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of a disaster, narratives about the event will be constructed. The paper presents the dominant local narrative of a major fire in Lærdal, Norway in 2014. Based on semi-structured interviews with residents in Lærdal, I argue that the construction of the dominant local narrative was influenced by three factors. First, the strong eastern wind during the night of the fire was blamed for the development of the fire, rather than individuals or organizations. Accordingly, people emphasize why the outcome of the fire was not worse rather than how it could have been avoided or mitigated. Second, as local people responded in terms of their appointed roles *and* as residents, communications and relations between responsible officials and affected parties were perceived as close and personal, again seen as a major strength in the efforts to combat the fire. Third, local social dynamics and capacities were highly important for the management of the fire. Particularly local knowledge was highlighted as an essential factor, especially as electricity supplies and telecommunications broke down during the night of the fire. Analyzing local narratives in the wake of a disaster can contribute to an understanding of the local social dynamics and capacities that are put into practice during a disaster, which otherwise may be difficult to identify.

1. Introduction

Unlike other ancient elements, fire is not a substance but a reaction. It cannot be studied in itself; it is a profoundly interactive technology; it is what its context makes it ([25], p. 4).

On January 18, 2014, Lærdal, a small municipality with 2200 inhabitants, experienced the worst fire in Norway since World War II. The fire was particularly challenging due to strong winds, and during the night electricity and telecommunication broke down. Even though the community was not prepared for a disaster of this dimension, no lives were lost. In disaster literature, there is an increasing attention to and recognition of the crucial role that community involvement may play in disaster management (e.g., [29,3,33,7]). However, in the case of Lærdal, the role of the community in the management of the fire is only to a limited degree acknowledged in the official reports that review the incident [30] and the responses to them [8,24]. Furthermore, local communities are generally recognized as most active in the pre-emptive and post-event phase of a disaster [28], and in social science research on fire the primary focus has been pre-fire mitigation and preparedness (see [20,21]).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how the fire in 2014 and the responses to it was perceived and enacted in the local community. The paper focuses on narratives of the responses *during* the fire, and demonstrates how a local community may not only play a vital role in the pre-emptive and post-event phase of a disaster but also during the event. In doing so, the paper provides insight into the embodied experiences of disasters and the ‘social nature of such happenings’ [26], p. 342). I argue that this is as important as statistics and technical reports for understanding disasters and disaster management [4]. Building on the notion of disasters as social constructions [1,23,26], the paper argues that meaning ascribed to events should be investigated as situated in the contexts in which they occur [4,6,9].

Top-down approaches to disaster management have been criticized for being detached from the lived experiences in the local communities who are responsible for the implementation of disaster management policies [12,29]. Furthermore, the notion of ‘once and for all’ solutions with the ideal that ‘one size fits all’ dismisses the social dynamics and capacities that are activated in communities when disasters occur. In a post-disaster study of the earthquake in the Abruzzo region in Italy 2009, Imperiale and Vanclay [14] found that the communities’ self-organization and positive collective action immediately after the earthquake enhanced the ability to cope with the challenges that followed

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the disaster. People shared stories and strategies, experienced a common fate and sense of responsibility, and were driven by strong emotions. This had a ripple effect for community survival and well-being, and further reinforced “...people's sense of community, social cohesion and social capital” [14], p. 216). Disaster research, when attentive to social dynamics, can identify and make visible local capacities important for improving disaster management.

A qualitative approach was chosen for the study in order to identify the local dominant narrative of the fire itself and the responses to it. Here, a *narrative* is understood as a story that people tell about an event or, in other words, the way certain views about a practice or an event are communicated [27]. The word *dominant* indicates an emphasis on the similarities between the stories rather than the differences [2]. Hence, my focus is on the shared narrative at the local level. A narrative-descriptive approach informed the analysis, which according to Tuan is used when “theories hover in the background while the complex phenomena themselves occupy the front stage” ([31], p. 686). In doing so, the paper accounts for ways of actions that can bring us closer to developing disaster risk-management plans that are not separated from the “practice of affected people at risk” ([34], p. 9).

The analysis of the material presented in this paper revealed that three factors influenced the construction of the dominant narrative of the fire and the responses to it. The first is the complex and unpredictable dimension of the fire, of which the eastern wind was held responsible. Second, the local people responded in terms of their appointed roles and as residents. Lastly, local social dynamics and capacities were acknowledged as highly important in the management of the fire. The paper starts out by presenting the “official” narratives in three formal reports, since they provide relevant background information, followed by a review of the literature relating to the factors mentioned above that can influence the construction of a dominant narrative.

2. Background

2.1. Official narratives and literature review

In the course of eleven days in January 2014, three fires broke out in three separate locations in Norway: Lærdal, Flatanger, and Frøya. All three fires have been characterized as major by Norwegian standards, either in terms of their complexity or impact, and are amongst the largest fires Norway has experienced in modern times. The fire in Lærdal received the most attention from the media. In just 13 days, 4000 articles were written about the fire [18]. In the following months, a number of in-depth media-coverage stories and documentaries were produced, and at the beginning of 2015 a documentary series was aired, following people that had been affected by the fire.¹

In the aftermath of the three fires, three official reports were produced: one concentrating on an assessment of the fire spread in Lærdal [30] and two reviewing and evaluating the responses to all three fires (at Lærdal, Flatanger, and Frøya) [8,24]. In the report by the Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection [8], the three municipalities are evaluated as being too small to lead and manage large and complicated events, especially since the fire chiefs in the municipalities work part-time. In particular, the municipalities were criticized for their lack of organization, leadership, and overview, as well as for not having updated emergency management plans. The report by PricewaterhouseCoopers AS (PwC), which was commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the evaluation outcome differs from the DSB report. It concludes that no information had been provided that could give grounds to claim that the impact of the fire in Lærdal could have been limited or that the fire could have

been put out sooner:

The scope of the fire surpassed what the local resources could handle. In a matter of hours, extensive mobilization of police, municipalities, healthcare, county, and others took place. In addition, residents, volunteer organizations and volunteers participated. Together, they succeeded in extinguishing the fire – without serious personal injuries ([24] p. 38).²

The conclusion presented in the DSB report [8] has created the most tension between local actors in the three municipalities and official representatives, and the report has been criticized for being too concerned with planning work and too little with what happened in practice [10,32]. These official reports may have influenced the construction of a competing local narrative of the fire and the responses to it. Furthermore, I have identified three factors from disaster literature that may have influenced the construction of the narrative in the wake of the disaster. The first factor relates to the cause and outcome of a disaster. [15] argue: “what people believe about the cause of an event can have an impact on how they respond to and in some cases recover from the event.” This in turn shapes discussions of responsibility, or put simply; who is to blame for not being able to avoid or mitigate the disaster. Moreover, if the outcome of a fire is loss of lives, there will be an even stronger tendency to focus on individuals or organizations that can be held responsible for the tragedy [13]. Second, interactions between agency personnel and local residents can affect perceptions of whether a disaster was well-managed or not [21], p. 13). For example, responsible officials’ communications to, and relations between, the affected parties matter in terms of how discussions of responsibility issues emerge in the aftermath of a disaster. The closer and more personal communication and relations are, the less blame is put on responsible officials for not being able to avoid or mitigate the disaster. Third, whether or not “local ways of doing things” have been acknowledged can affect the level of conflicts in the aftermath of a fire ([5], p. 276). If local social dynamics and capacities are dismissed, particularly by non-local entities, social conflicts are more likely to arise on the local level [5], p. 262).

2.2. Lærdal

The Lærdal Municipality is located on the south side of Sognefjorden in the county of Sogn & Fjordane (61°03'04" N, 07°35'52" E), in Western Norway. The municipality has a population of ca. 2100, of which around 1100 of them live in the administrative center, Lærdalsøyri [24]. Lærdal ranks 66th in Norway in terms of area size (1342 km²) and has a low population density of 1.7 per km². Its physical geography is characterized by mountain areas and valleys, and by the river, Lærdalselvi, which flows from the mountains in the east to Sognefjorden. The climate in Lærdal is dry and warm with annual precipitation of only 410 mm [19]. During winter, the winds can be strong. Especially the wind from the east (*austavinden*) is challenging, due to strong and erratic gusting. In the administrative center, Lærdalsøyri, is an old village, Old Lærdalsøyri. Old Lærdalsøyri is of national value and has 160 protected buildings, and most of the wooden building structures have remained intact since the 1800s [17].

3. Materials and method

The choice of a single case study was not made with the aim that it can be generalized, but rather with the aim to provide context-dependent knowledge as a means for learning [11]. It is an unusual case. Although three fires occurred in Norway January 2014, fires of that dimension cannot be said to be typical in Norway. Additionally, it was only in Lærdal that electricity supplies and telecommunications

¹ “Bygd reis deg” [Village, rise up] broadcast on TV 2.

² The quotations from Norwegian publications have been translated by the author.

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