



The transforming perception of a regional geohazard between coastal defence and mediated discourse on global warming: Storm surges in Hamburg, Germany

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The term regional geohazard is used for a major geophysical risk which can lead to a natural disaster. The effects will be strictly located to a specific region. It is expected but still not proven that global warming will intensify weather extremes and thus the number of regional geohazards will increase. Regional geohazards are not dangerous per se, but from the perspective of human beings certain weather and nature extremes are considered dangerous as they impose damage on human beings and their belongings. Therefore the media often call them 'natural disaster' and as a matter of fact it seems to be a 'must' - according to theory and practice of news selections - that media report on any natural disaster that occur in their region. Moreover, media even report on geohazards in any other region as soon as these events seem to have any general impact.

The major geophysical risk along the coast of the North Sea is storm surges. A long list of historical disasters has deeply engraved the ubiquity of this hazard into the collective memory and habitus of the local population. Not only coastal region is concerned by this danger but also the megacity of Hamburg. Hamburg is the second-largest city in Germany and the sixth-largest city in the European Union. The Hamburg Metropolitan Region has more than 4.3 million inhabitants. The estuary of the river Elbe extends from Cuxhaven (coast) to Hamburg a distance of about 130 km. Hamburg has often been subject to storm surges with significant damages. But after the storm flood in 1855 for more than 100 years until 1962 no severe storm surge happened. The Big Flood in the night from February 16 to February 17 1962 destroyed the homes of about 60.000 people. The death toll amounted to 315 in the city of Hamburg, where the storm surge had a traumatic impact and was followed by political decisions driven by the believe in technological solutions. After 1962 massive investments into the coastal defence were made and dikes were raised. Since 1962 several very high storm surges took place, however the newly enforced coastal defence held and only minor damages were reported. Even if the number of very high storm surges as well as their height has significantly increased in the recent past, the effective coastal defence has created a perception of absolute security (von Storch/Woth/Gönnert 2006). Almost half a century after the traumatic disaster the question arises whether the 1962 storm surge has become a 'neutral' historical event, and if so, whether it has any impact on today's perception on global warming.

In this paper we want to analyse and discuss the role of media coverage in the perception and interpretation of the Hamburg storm surge 1962 and the role of the media in the construction of collective memory. This long-term-perspective focuses the media coverage at commemoration days and additionally the fictional reporting on geohazards, especially in film-documentaries. We will discuss the hypotheses that regional geohazards become part of the collective memory and are indicators of a society's mental mapping. The way geohazards are recalled indicates social gaps and divides (e.g. the profile of the victims, the persons and groups who had to suffer most), the importance of social institutions (e.g. military vs. civil forces in rescue operations), the values and believes in a society (e.g. the importance of religion, technology, ecology). Additional we will analyse some typical patterns of journalistic coverage on a regional geohazard along the time-line. We can distinguish three main stages of actual reporting, starting with the 'pure' event, then the damages, and finally the mistakes, responsibilities and debts of (political) authorities and (business) stakeholder

Reference:

von Storch, Hans, Katja Woth and Gabriele Gönner (2006): Storm surges - the case of Hamburg. Paper presented on "GEC, nature disasters, and their implications for urban security in coastal urban areas"