



Earthquake prediction rumors can help in building earthquake awareness: the case of May the 11th 2011 in Rome (Italy)

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Banner headlines in an Italian newspaper read on May 11, 2011: “Absence boom in offices: the urban legend in Rome become psychosis”. This was the effect of a large-magnitude earthquake prediction in Rome for May 11, 2011. This prediction was never officially released, but it grew up in Internet and was amplified by media. It was erroneously ascribed to Raffaele Bendandi, an Italian self-taught natural scientist who studied planetary motions and related them to earthquakes. Indeed, around May 11, 2011, there was a planetary alignment and this increased the earthquake prediction credibility.

Given the echo of this earthquake prediction, INGV decided to organize on May 11 (the same day the earthquake was predicted to happen) an Open Day in its headquarter in Rome to inform on the Italian seismicity and the earthquake physics. The Open Day was preceded by a press conference two days before, attended by about 40 journalists from newspapers, local and national TV’s, press agencies and web news magazines. Hundreds of articles appeared in the following two days, advertising the 11 May Open Day. On May 11 the INGV headquarter was peacefully invaded by over 3,000 visitors from 9am to 9pm: families, students, civil protection groups and many journalists. The program included conferences on a wide variety of subjects (from social impact of rumors to seismic risk reduction) and distribution of books and brochures, in addition to several activities: meetings with INGV researchers to discuss scientific issues, visits to the seismic monitoring room (open 24h/7 all year), guided tours through interactive exhibitions on earthquakes and Earth’s deep structure. During the same day, thirteen new videos have also been posted on our youtube/INGVterremoti channel to explain the earthquake process and hazard, and to provide real time periodic updates on seismicity in Italy. On May 11 no large earthquake happened in Italy.

The initiative, built up in few weeks, had a very large feedback, and was a great opportunity to talk with journalists and people about earthquake prediction and more in general about seismic risk in Italy. In general, the media attention to scientific topics raise up only after disasters or before fake predictions, unfortunately. This was the case of the May 11 event, for which the public fear triggered the media reaction and vice-versa. We took advantage of this circumstance to increase seismic risk awareness and build a bridge between researchers and journalists, contributing to turn a mass psychosis into an important opportunity for science communication.

The May-11 Team included Simona Cerrato (SissaMedialab, Trieste, Italy), about 50 INGV colleagues from Rome and Irpinia offices, including the Press Office, the Laboratory of Scientific Education and Outreach, the Images and Graphics Laboratory, the Copies Office, and the researchers and technicians on duty in the INGV-Rome seismic monitoring room.