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Approaches to communication in response to geo-hydrological risk: POLARIS an Italian web initiative.

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In the contemporary information and knowledge-based society, communication can foster effective responses to geo-hydrological risks, by increasing awareness on the causes and consequences of specific hazards, e.g., landslides, debris flows, and floods, and by fostering the capacity of individuals, groups, and organizations to prepare, manage and recover from geo-hydrological events. In this context, communication plays a vital role in all phases of the disaster cycle. Although in the last few years the scientific community has begun to disseminate information on geo-hydrological hazards and the associated risks through thematic websites, these remain mainly addressed to experts for specific technical purposes with contents and web interfaces hardly appreciated by a wider audience and rarely synchronised with social networks. To address the problem posed by the lack of communication on geo-hydrological hazards with potential human consequence in Italy, we designed the POLARIS Web site. The initiative we are conducting has the main object of contributing, in different ways and at different geographical scales, to raise awareness about landslides and floods, and their impact on the Italian society. The website is structured into six main sections (i.e. Reports, Are you ready, Events, Alert Zones, Focus and Blog) that provide different and complementary information including, respectively: periodical reports on landslide and flood risk to the population of Italy, suitable behaviors to adopt during damaging events, data and analyses on specific events, visual and detailed info on damaging events of the Italian Alert Zones defined by the Civil Protection Authority and blog-posts on landslide and flood events encouraging citizens' participation to crowd-sourcing information. Consultants experienced in project management, web-communication strategies on natural hazards, info-graphics, and user experience design were involved in the initiative to arrange and publish the information, considering usability and accessibility of the website, and key graphic aspects of web 2.0 information, making the web site communication more effective to users pertaining to diversified audiences. Specific icons are designed to describe the geo-hydrological events and maps to visualize their impact on the territory. The scientific and technical contents are edited using appropriate communication strategies which adopt a less technical and more widely comprehensible language, using intuitive and engaging web interfaces and linking messages to social media that encourage citizens' interactions. Monitoring the access of users to the website during more than a year after its publication, we noticed how the majority of the access corresponds to the occurrence of the worst geo-hydrological events and, in particular, when journalists or scientists promoted the website through television. Such a positive effect on the growth of users access suggested us to enhance our collaboration with scientific journalists by linking traditional (i.e. TV) and social media to further enlarge the awareness of website and to better explain users how to use the website information for increasing their resilience to geo-hydrological hazards.