EGU24-5397, updated on 20 May 2024
https://doi.org/10.5194/egusphere-egu24-5397
EGU General Assembly 2024

How to make droughts newsworthy: lessons from the 2022/2023 snow deficit in the Italian Alps

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Winter 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 were characterized by extreme drought conditions across the Italian Alps, with a –60% in Snow Water Equivalent at peak accumulation compared to recent years. During summer 2022, this deficit in snow compounded the ongoing precipitation deficit and temperature anomaly in dictating historical lows in water supply across the Po river basin. In this context, in January 2022 CIMA Research Foundation initiated periodic communication actions on social media and its website (https://www.cimafoundation.org/en/) to report on the ongoing snow-drought conditions and the potential implications for water security. This effort started from dissemination on social media, such as threads on Twitter/X (https://twitter.com/CIMAFoundation/status/1646451722968088577) and on LinkedIn, and ended up in triggering a significant media coverage in the form of national/international newspapers, all-news TV outlets, blogs, podcasts, and official reports at various levels. The communication became a campaign that influenced drought storytelling in Italy, creating an unexpected "snowball effect". In this case study, CIMA's researchers got together with some of the journalists and science communicators who covered this event to discuss reasons for its newsworthiness and mediatic lessons learned for the future of the scientific communication in a warming climate. Working at the science-media interface, we learned the role that key messages, regularity in information release, visual identity, and simplicity play in driving communication. We also confirm the central role of a two-step methodology in which scientists create content that is delivered to the public by a mediator (whether a journalist or an organization), and the importance both for scientists to actively engage with such mediators to get the message across and for journalists to look at, and

trust, specific sources of information. This activity is continuing in 2023/24 as snow conditions face increasing pressure from warming temperatures and aridity. In the long run, it will bring awareness to the citizenship on the crucial role of immediate and credible climate-change adaptation strategies at multiple levels.