



## **Hamburg 1962 then and now – a memory career of a regional geohazard**

B.M.W. Ratter (1), I. Neverla (2), and C. Lüthje (3)

(1) University of Hamburg, Institute of Geography, CliSAP, Hamburg, Germany (ratter@geowiss.uni-hamburg.de), (2) University of Hamburg, Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies, CliSAP, Hamburg, Germany (irene.neverla@uni-hamburg.de), (3) University of Hamburg, Institute of Journalism and Mass Communication Studies, CliSAP, Hamburg, Germany (corinna.luehje@uni-hamburg.de)

Storm surges are regional geohazards. They are characterized by features such as geographical position and the likelihood of recurrence. Whether and how a society is ready to develop and use concepts of hazard management depends on likelihood, frequency of occurrence, and intensity of effects. However, a sense of threat from a natural phenomenon is a fundamental component. Such perceptions are bound to the memories of key events. In this paper we analyse the relevance of the social memory of the 1962 Hamburg storm surge, the transformation of memory over time, and the function of mass media in this process. These questions will be explored in the context of an interdisciplinary approach using concepts of human geography and communication studies.

The starting point is the dependency of societal development from spatial and geographical circumstances. Settlement influences the natural system and thus constitutes an environment. Awareness of regional circumstances and hazards leads to strategies of adaptation and mitigation. A precondition of awareness is the collective experience and memory of a traumatic event. Mass media and journalism are ‘memory agents’ and thus play an important role in the construction of the social memory and the ‘memory career’ of the phenomenon. In the social practice of ‘memory talk’ mediated memories will be mixed with individual and collective memories as well as historic and contemporary experiences.

The major geohazard along the coast of the North Sea, including the city of Hamburg, are storm surges. The estuary of the river Elbe extends 100km from Cuxhaven to Hamburg. The Hamburg harbour uses this geographical position and has developed into an important economic force. As a seaport Hamburg must adjust the stream course to the demands of the shipping traffic. These adjustments as well as dike construction have an impact on the natural system. Coastal protection minimizes the effects of storm surges but also enforces the events to happen as well as their intensity due to narrowing of the stream course.

When the storm surge flooded Hamburg in 1962, the city was not at all prepared. The last severe storm surge dated back to more than 100 years earlier: awareness had disappeared and defences neglected. The response to the 1962 experience was a new and extensive program of dike construction.

In the 48 years since, a gradual generation shift took place. The effective coastal defence has created a perception of absolute security, despite the new climate change discussions. Meanwhile, new urban development projects are ongoing in the middle of the river Elbe – the HafenCity, and Hamburg’s endangered river island Wilhelmsburg. Hazard-management is dependent on awareness. Almost half a century after the disaster the question arises, whether the 1962 storm surge has fallen into oblivion? Or has the memory talk split the past from the future? What is the impact of the memory career on the handling of new challenges and storm surges? What is the role of the media in this process?