

M5.9 Panic: Dimensions of its use and meaning in print

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Abstract: In an emergency situation, risk communicators want the public to proceed with an orderly evacuation or take preventive actions rather than ensuing in panic. The current understanding of panic from psychology includes an acute emotional response or unreasoning terror often associated with mass flight, as opposed to LaPierre's sociological definition as the opposite of regimental behavior. This distinction between social and individual psychological response is important for understanding the role of panic in the public's response to risky situations and whether communicators should avoid mentioning it. Fischhoff contends that group panic is actually relatively uncommon in response to a dangerous situation, yet photographs and descriptions often linger on the first panic response, neglecting the orderly evacuation that follows (e.g. Chess, 2006). A content analysis was conducted for 340 instances of the word panic used to describe a situation in 299 articles sampled over one year from influential local/regional US newspapers and national newspapers from three western countries. The results suggest that all newspapers do not use the term panic with the same frequency ($X^2 = 100$; $p < .000$), panic is most likely to be in a news or feature story, and negative uses appear nearer the front page. Interestingly, individuals rather than groups were the focus of most panic references, with groups significantly higher only for financial panic, whereas, individuals were dominant for panic originating from transportation, health-related, personal and unintentional causes. The most frequent cause of panic was anxiety (41%), followed by financial panic, sports, intentional acts (e.g. terror attack), time-constraints, and personal health issues other than anxiety. Panic was most frequently used in the journalist's own writing rather than a direct quote. International, gender, valence and source differences, as well as implications for risk communicators are also discussed.