



---

## Does Media Discourse Favour the Emergence of Avalanche Risk in Medium-High Mountain Regions? Between Ignorance and Underestimation, the Example of the Vosges Mountains

Florie Giacona, Brice Martin and Nicolas Eckert

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/3852>  
ISSN: 1760-7426

### Publisher

Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine

### Electronic reference

Florie Giacona, Brice Martin and Nicolas Eckert, « Does Media Discourse Favour the Emergence of Avalanche Risk in Medium-High Mountain Regions? Between Ignorance and Underestimation, the Example of the Vosges Mountains », *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [Online], 105-4 | 2017, Online since 26 November 2017, connection on 06 March 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/rga/3852>

---

This text was automatically generated on 6 March 2018.



La Revue de Géographie Alpine est mise à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# Does Media Discourse Favour the Emergence of Avalanche Risk in Medium-High Mountain Regions? Between Ignorance and Underestimation, the Example of the Vosges Mountains

Florie Giacona, Brice Martin and Nicolas Eckert

---

## Introduction

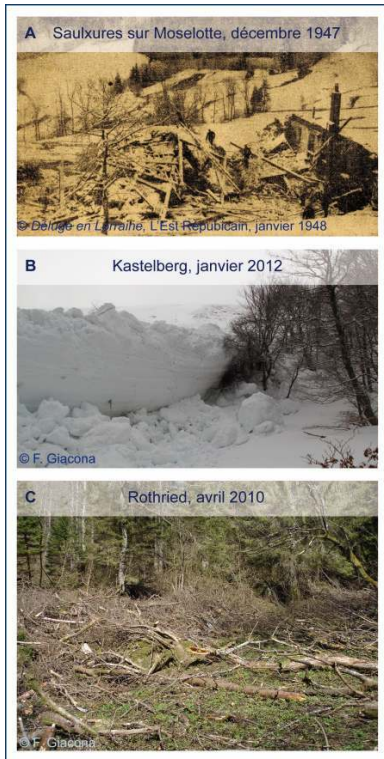
- 1 This article is part of a comprehensive consideration of how we understand the emergence (or rather, the non-emergence) of avalanche risk in medium-high mountains. Defined at the intersection between social, territorial and temporal dimensions, risk is not understood as a damaging phenomenon but rather as “its projected social form” (Martinais, 2006). It takes shape through the processes of identification, nomination and definition and through the implementation of preventive and protective actions. Largely constructed on the basis of problems encountered in high-mountain areas, the avalanche risk management system is in fact highly territorialised. Furthermore, high mountains are a privileged study area for avalanche risk. For this reason, medium-high mountains, which are also affected by the phenomenon of avalanches and the risks associated with them, are neglected by managers, politicians and scientists (Giacona *et al.*, 2017a).
- 2 Generally speaking, “public policies” shape the problem (November, 2012) and define the “construction” (Gilbert, 2003) of avalanche risk and the territorial anchorage of its management. However, this does not mean that other stakeholders cannot define it (Thareau, 2014), take charge of it and make it a public issue. This article is based on the premise that risk emerges through its recognition and structuration as a collective

problem by actors who may come from different fields (Gilbert, 1998). Specifically, media communication plays an important role in the process of socially constructing risk by participating in the development and dissemination (or even consolidation) of knowledge and representations (Joffe and Orfali, 2005; Rouquette and Rateau, 1998). This paper's aim is to determine whether media actors favour the emergence of avalanche risk in medium-high mountains through the informative and preventive value of their content. It should be noted that, while the analysis of the media discourse's contribution to risk construction seems to be of growing interest in the health (Hervé-Bazin, 2014) and technological sectors (Sicard, 1999), it is still little investigated with regard to natural hazards, especially in France, and more particularly in the case of mountain risks.

- 3 More specifically, the media's relation to the avalanche phenomenon needs to be examined. In other words, we seek to understand the way in which risk is taken into account in the media discourse and how avalanche occurrences are described in words and images. Finally, it is important to study the relationships between risk and territory and to determine whether avalanche risk is perceived as a component of the medium-high mountain territory. Since the hazard has a specific spatial anchorage, we hypothesise that there is a close link between the representations of avalanche risk and those of the areas concerned. We also assume that media, through their form and content, can contribute to shaping space (Noyer and Raoul, 2011a). Thus, our reflection is naturally oriented towards the spatial dimension of the risk and how the various actors perceive it. This requires that we pay attention to avalanches occurring in both high- and in medium-high mountain regions.
- 4 In the vast media landscape, our attention is focused on the media responsible for everyday information and, sometimes, for spreading prevention messages. Their influence depends on a number of factors, including their level of penetration, their credibility and their social practices (the way in which people consume media content). A detailed study of all these factors is beyond the scope of this work; however, we believe that, by selecting and processing the information that they deem to be the most important, the news media take part in defining our space-time continuum and the events comprising it (Bougnoux, 2006; Champagne, 1999). For example, according to Philippe Descamps (2013), they give particular visibility to avalanches that cause death or injure people at the expense of phenomena of possibly larger size that do not cause any casualties. Thus, although the media (the diffusion technique that brings the message between a transmitter and a receiver) play an important role (Durand, 1981), the focus here is more on the content of the message that is conveyed.
- 5 With regard to medium-high mountain areas, the example of the Vosges Mountains, located in France's north-eastern part, is particularly interesting. It has topographical, snow and weather features favourable to the formation of snow accumulations, cornices and avalanches (Flageollet, 2003; Wahl *et al.*, 2007). A geo-historical analysis identified 730 avalanches since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (from the winter of 1783 to the winter of 2013) in 128 avalanche paths (Giacona *et al.* 2017b). The rather regular occurrence of large-size and/or damaging events (Fig. 1) makes it possible to analyse how media communicate about avalanche risk, especially because casualties are not uncommon. In this study period, we documented 94 avalanches that caused casualties, three-quarters of which have occurred since the early 1990s (Giacona *et al.* 2017b).
- 6 After the corpus of data and the methodology used are presented, the first part of this article highlights the (low) contribution of media to the visibility of the reality of the

avalanche risk in the Vosges Mountains. The second part shows that the media discourse implicitly conveys the image of a territory of which avalanche risk is not an intrinsic component.

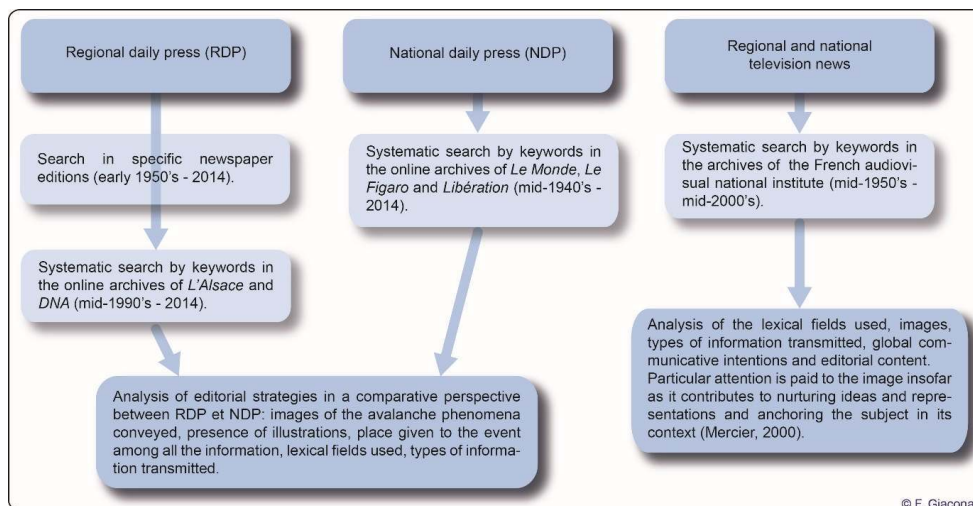
Figure 1: Avalanche activity in the Vosges Mountains: property damages (A), snow avalanche deposit (B) and destruction of a forest stand (C)



## Data and methodology used

- 7 The corpus of sources has been constructed so as to articulate spatial scales (the Vosges Mountains and high mountains, mainly the Alps), communication vectors and media coverage techniques (press and television) and, thus, target audiences: the whole population (national mass media) or a more regional public (regional media). We are particularly interested in “media that, among others, provide their audience with representations of current events” (Chupin, 2012). An exhaustive analysis of the press and television news was carried out. For technical and practical reasons, in particular because of the proliferation of radio stations and websites, research was not extended to these media.<sup>1</sup> Two techniques of producing and transmitting messages were therefore taken into account:<sup>2</sup> on the one hand, the regional daily press (RDP)<sup>3</sup> and the national daily press (NDP)<sup>4</sup>, and, on the other hand, the audiovisual media, in which we targeted national and regional news<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 2).

Figure 2: Organisational chart of the research method in the news media



- 8 The analysis covers the time frame spanning from the post-war period to the present day, the aim being to have a temporal continuum in order to put the relationships between media, risk and territory into perspective. Although the regional media (the press) have reported damaging avalanches in the Vosges Mountains since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, reports have been more frequent since the 1950s. This increase is linked to the development of winter recreational activities and, hence, accidents. In addition, the archival base of television news, which can be viewed at France's National Audiovisual Institute (INA), begins in 1949 for national broadcasters and in 1954 for regional broadcasters. The large size of the collected documentary mass as well as the way in which it has been processed (by cross-checking the information), has made it possible to reach solid conclusions. These are illustrated in what follows by using notes and selected samples.

## A discourse that does not permit the appropriation of the reality of avalanche risk in medium-high mountains

- 9 By presenting only rare elements that attest to the concrete reality of avalanches occurring in the Vosges Mountains and by disseminating very little specific preventive information, the media do not participate much in the process of risk objectification in medium-high mountains. This editorial strategy is very different from the one used in the Alpine environment, where risk is presented in a much more concrete and pedagogical way.

### Avalanches in the Vosges Mountains, only a local point of interest

- 10 The avalanches in the Vosges Mountains that have required the intervention of rescue services or snowploughs are generally treated by the regional media. However, editorial strategies (position and dimensions of the article, adding photographs to the text, *in situ* reportage, choice of headline etc.) vary from one event to the next. Such events can be mentioned in local pages among the news in brief,<sup>6</sup> or, at best, hit the headlines or be the

subject of a series of reports/articles. For example, in 1973, the report on an accident that had killed a young girl in the Schallern Valley hit the headlines next to an article about the ceasefire in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Also, several editions of television news and regional daily press were devoted to the accidents that killed a young skier in February 1984<sup>8</sup> and two Belgian tourists on 29 January 2000.<sup>9</sup>

- 11 By contrast, accidents in the Vosges Mountains have been the subject of articles in the national daily press only on two occasions: in 2000 and in 2005.<sup>10</sup> These relatively brief articles contain just a few details and mostly reproduce dispatches from Agence France-Presse. Information is sometimes the subject of a small article in its own right<sup>11</sup> but is often drowned out by other news.<sup>12</sup> National television news broadcasts barely report on avalanches in the Vosges Mountains. Only the two accidents of 29 January 2000 (one resulted in the deaths of two Belgian snowshoe hikers, and the other concerned a group of cross-country skiers) were announced on the 30 January news and reported in the 8 p.m. bulletin on *TF1* and at noon and 8 p.m. on *France 2*. The national media coverage of these events is certainly linked to the particular context in which they took place, a generalised avalanche risk over all mountains in France, particularly in the Alps. This low media coverage has the direct consequence of making the avalanches of the Vosges Mountains relatively invisible to the majority of the French population.

### A non-objectified risk, without an “effect of reality”

- 12 As a “direct witness of ‘what was there’”, the image participates in the concrete reality of the phenomenon (Barthes, 1968) and is likely to play an important role in its representation. It should be noted that, with a few exceptions,<sup>13</sup> there has been a lack of illustrations of avalanches that have occurred in the Vosges Mountains. In fact, even when the images show the area concerned, they do not focus on the phenomenon itself. The television reports’ background or the images used to bolster the voice commentary sometimes make use of a symbolic figure, such as the Mountain Gendarmerie Platoon in action.<sup>14</sup> This choice of visuals contributes to the credibility of information and to the “effect of reality” (Barthes, 1968; Mercier, 2000), although it is attenuated by the absence of factual indications regarding, for example, the location (often blurred) of the release area, the inclination and orientation of the slope, the experience of the victims or the size of the group to which they belonged. More broadly, regional media do not assume the role, which they could take, of providing “expert” knowledge (Joffe and Orfali, 2005) to the public. Few articles or reports contribute to increasing the knowledge and understanding of the avalanche hazard in the Vosges Mountains, except for those that regularly report on rescue exercises.<sup>15</sup> It is striking that the RDP only seldom makes reference to the National Association for the Study of Snow and Avalanches (ANENA). By contrast, the latter is frequently cited in the NDP.
- 13 The national coverage of events occurring in high mountains is quite different, especially in the Alps. Very quickly, images are shown of avalanches in inhabited areas or in off-track ski sectors. Here, the image itself is meaningful, and its informative value is direct (Mercier, 2000). Pictures of damage to property and infrastructure (road cut-offs) and of rescue operations (investigation of avalanche deposits and release of people buried in the snow) are shown as backgrounds supporting the journalists’ statements.<sup>16</sup> The viewer can assess the phenomenon’s physical characteristics and the damage caused. The image is supported by comments, including the extent and consequence of the natural

phenomenon, whether by vague<sup>17</sup> or thanks to more detailed indications.<sup>18</sup> In addition, national news broadcasts and the NDP do not hesitate, in the case of events in high mountains, to interview specialists on the issue. By going against certain preconceived notions<sup>19</sup> and providing enough elements to understand what happened, such articles/reports can help to offer education about risk.<sup>20</sup> Using figures (in particular, regarding accidents), they raise public awareness of the consequences of off-track skiing.<sup>21</sup> This awareness can also take the form of danger reminders, often released in the run-up to the school holidays.<sup>22</sup> In that case, the vocabulary used is specific, and detailed snow and weather information is provided (e.g. *Le Monde*, 4 January 1995).

- 14 Thus, contrary to what is done for Alpine avalanches, by relying very little on objective information and facts allowing the risk to acquiring a material reality, the media contribute little to making the risk in medium-high mountains, and especially in the Vosges Mountains, “objective”. Yet, some reports do contribute to risk awareness. One of them presents the work of the *Météo France* team, located in Belfort, in estimating the risk of avalanches in the Vosges Mountains.<sup>23</sup> Since February 2000, the RDP diffuses “snow flow alerts”,<sup>24</sup> but the small corresponding articles are often mixed together with various other news in brief, relating to the practice of skiing, the opening of ski-resorts or traffic and road problems caused by the snow, which makes them less remarkable (Fig. 3). Sometimes, accidents also provide an opportunity to relate a small history<sup>25</sup> that can nourish the reader’s knowledge on the subject. More generally, drama in the high mountains, as in 1998 (Crête du Lauzet) and 1999 (Montroc), may be an opportunity to indicate that there is also a risk of avalanches in the Vosges Mountains<sup>26</sup> and calls for wisdom: “Caution in mountains after the tragic accident that occurred last week in the ‘Hautes-Alpes’, awareness is also required in the Vosges Mountains.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, as a result of accidents, the RDP has sometimes relayed a real need for safety. In 1984, through the demand for the classification of the Munster Valley as a “winter sports resort”, it requested “to have skilled trackers-rescuers able to close a track in the case of danger of avalanche”,<sup>28</sup> or even, in 1994, pleaded for the implementation of artificial avalanche triggering plans.<sup>29</sup>

Figure 3: "Snow flow alert" in the "news in brief" section of the *L'Alsace* newspaper, 29 January 2016



## The construction of the image of a territory with little risk

15 The weak media coverage of avalanches in the Vosges Mountains, particularly at the national level, makes this mountain environment's inherent risks less tangible. The situation is accentuated by the ways in which the avalanches occurring in the Vosges Mountains are treated differently from those in the high mountains. The latter are generally conveyed much more dramatically by the media. Through the media discourse, it is the very question of danger in the Vosges Mountains that is left open. By implicitly participating in the construction of the image of a territory in which there is little avalanche risk, the media help to draw a distinction between the Vosges Mountains and the high mountains, especially the Alps, for which avalanches seem to be a distinctive attribute.

## Dramaturgy and lexical field: avalanches, a phenomenon minimised in medium-high Mountains

16 The media treat avalanche risk rather differently depending on the particular spaces in which events occur. Emotion and pain surround a few events in the Vosges Mountains,<sup>30</sup> and some of them are described in a particularly poignant way, as suggested by the headlines "White death in Gaschney",<sup>31</sup> "The Vosges Mountains have killed"<sup>32</sup> and "The Vosges in mourning"<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 4). Specifically, in January 1973, one could read in the RDP "a spring that a six-year-old girl will never see"<sup>34</sup> and a death in "particularly awful



circumstances”.<sup>35</sup> After the death of a skier in 1976, an article in *L'Alsace* mentions skiers who, “out of respect for the pain, stopped next to a passing procession and removed their snow caps”. Also, the “whole Gaschney”, a ski resort, is described as being in mourning, and the reader is told that inside the group tasked with carrying the body “there was silence: a conspicuous silence”. This latter example is illustrated with a photograph of the group around the stretcher and the victim’s body.<sup>36</sup> In January 2000, the press mentions a “mountain of pain”, “mournful snow”, “faded mountain”, “massif veiled in grey” and “suffering of survivors”, accompanied by photographs of a body being evacuated and of a rescue team exploring the avalanche deposit.<sup>37</sup> Photographs are sometimes combined with striking text to reinforce the dramatic dimension. By focusing mainly on people who have participated in the rescue operations or have been affected by the accident, or even on mountain professionals, these editorial choices highlight the “representation of victims as living dramatic scenes” (Solomon-Godeau, 2009).

- 17 However, apart from these few exceptions, most articles/reports relating avalanche events in the Vosges Mountains are free from any emotional dimension. By contrast, such a dimension can often be found with respect to high mountain events. The emotion and the pain are brought to the reader’s attention by evoking the families’ contemplation, pain and emotion, all of which is communicated to the reader who finds himself or herself indirectly in the heart of the scene.<sup>38</sup> Messages of support (personalities, ministers) are also included in articles, as well as narrations of witnesses or survivors.<sup>39</sup> The emotion can go as far as to oppose the victims and their families to people potentially responsible for the drama.<sup>40</sup> If necessary, as in 1964, the journalists themselves construct the dramaturgy: “since yesterday, in Chamonix, there has been consternation. Yet, there was no heart-breaking scene, there was no outsourcing of the pain. All the Chamoniards [the inhabitants of Chamonix], all the families in pain retain an extraordinary dignity”<sup>41</sup>. Also, the journalists speak of “drama”, “catastrophe” and the “terrible” toll of casualties<sup>42</sup>

Figure 4: Front page of *L'Alsace*, 30 January 2000: "The Vosges Mountains have killed"

- 18 The dramaturgy also relates to the damage caused and the lexical field of destruction used to relate the avalanches occurring in high mountains. These are presented as particularly destructive phenomena that wipe out any obstacles in their path: “the avalanche destroys and sweeps away everything in its path”<sup>43</sup>. Also, “avalanches unleash, strike, overturn, carry, transport, pulverise, grind, sweep, blow away infrastructure and forest stands”.<sup>44</sup> Another way of insisting on the violence of avalanches in high mountains is by describing the post-avalanche landscape, especially in the case of Montroc. “Chaos”, “the apocalypse” and a “terrible cataclysm”, or even “hell”, are mentioned.<sup>45</sup> Another characteristic of the narrative of avalanche phenomena in high mountains is, contrary to the events in the Vosges Mountains, the insistence on their sudden character or their speed, and how it caught the victims by surprise.<sup>46</sup>
- 19 Eventually, by displaying images of large Alpine powder snow avalanches<sup>47</sup> destroying everything in their path (even though such avalanches remain exceptional, even in high mountains), by narrating the events with a dramatic tone and by using words highlighting their considerable dimensions and destructive power, the media contribute to building an avalanche representation that does not correspond to the reality of the Vosges Mountains (Giacona et al., 2017b). Sometimes such images can even be found in the regional media when they inform about local risk. After avalanches that caused the deaths of two people in the Black Forest (Germany) in January 2015, the *France 3 Alsace* television channel published an article online urging caution in the Vosges Mountains but illustrated it with a photograph of a powder snow avalanche provided by ANENA and probably taken in the Alps (Fig. 5)! Assuming that the media’s discourses and images generate meanings that contribute to render sensible, “visible and recognisable” avalanches as well as the locations in which they occur (Noyer and Raoul, 2011b), the media arguably play a role in minimising the hazard in the Vosges Mountains. The

terminology used also plays a role and makes the identification of avalanches problematic. Thus, following an accident in 2007, the presenter of the TV news mentions a “break in the snowpack”.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, one headline in *L’Alsace* (RDP) on 31 January 2010 read: “Ballon d’Alsace [a summit of the Vosges Mountains]: a snowshoe hiker slides on a snow slab”, suggesting that he was the victim of a simple fall. However, the phenomenon can be grasped by thoughts and understood only if it is adequately named (Noyer and Raoul, 2011b). The vocabulary used plays an important role. Since the 1970s, regional media have used two different words – avalanches and snow flows, sometimes in the same article – without any logic of use for the two terms, except that the phenomena affecting roads in the Vosges Mountains are always referred to as “snow flows”.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the choice of one of these two terms is not neutral, since “snow flow” could tend to minimise the phenomenon (Ancey, 1998; Burnet, 2004).

Figure 5: Online article of the *France 3 Alsace* television channel combining a photograph taken in a typical Alpine environment and showing a powder snow avalanche with an article relating two accidents that occurred in the Black Forest (Germany), 31 January 2015



## A territory where risk is an exception rather than the rule

- 20 More broadly, actors in the media implicitly contribute to creating an image of the Vosges Mountains in which the risk of avalanches is, at most, very occasional and localised. Indeed, the question of danger in the Vosges Mountains had remained in the news media since the 1960s. After an accident in March 1968, an article mentioned that, to date, no one had been aware of avalanche danger, whereas “yesterday the snow almost killed”<sup>50</sup>. Similarly, *L’Alsace* indicates on 23 January 1973 that “many curious onlookers came to see the scene of the drama in order to try to understand what happened, as it seemed so improbable that the serene Vosges Mountains, the *mountains for cows*, could

kill". After the fatal accident of 1 February 1984, a reporter says that Schallern Valley, where the avalanche took place, is "a dangerous place, OK, but probably not to the point of being killed there"<sup>51</sup>. The message was still tentative in the late 1990s. Within a year, the *France 3 Lorraine* television channel announced that there is risk before arguing the opposite. Indeed, whereas in 1999 a TV news broadcast of *France 3 Lorraine* announces that "in the Vosges Mountains, an avalanche cannot be excluded, [and some] risk exists"<sup>52</sup>, another broadcast casts doubts by asking: "Is there any avalanche risk in the Vosges Mountains?"<sup>53</sup> The question seems to be answered at the turn of the 2000s when the danger of the massif is confirmed, but, recently, the scarcity of the phenomenon was still being emphasised. In 2010, a journalist said in an article concerning "exceptional' avalanches" that, because the hazard is localised, the "risk of an accident [is] low"<sup>54</sup>. Then, in January 2014, national and regional media agreed on the localised nature of the hazard and the scarcity of accidents in the massif.<sup>55</sup> This mention is often accompanied by a statement about the unspectacular nature of the Vosgian avalanches. The whole picture eventually tempers the actual risk.<sup>56</sup>

- 21 This ambiguity of discourses is reflected in the RDP by the ambivalence between the promotion of off-track skiing practices and a simultaneous call for caution.<sup>57</sup> In January 2006, the regional media *DNA* notes, on the one hand, that off-track skiing is increasingly popular in the Vosges Mountains, and, on the other hand, that some paths "are not safe". The message of caution is accompanied by photographs of practitioners, in action in avalanche paths, enjoying panoramas that could likely inspire others to discover them (Fig. 6)! Some specific at-risk areas are cited, and it is concluded that "in all cases: average skiers or beginners should not go" and that "it is never shameful to turn back". Should it then be concluded that experienced skiers are exempt from the risk of avalanches?

Figure 6: Ambivalence of media discourse: illustrations accompanying the appeal to warning against off-piste practice in the Vosges Mountains. Headline and excerpt, *DNA*, 16 January 2006



- 22 Whereas danger in the Vosges Mountains is still being questioned, its reality in the Alps is implicitly obvious. It is an intrinsic characteristic of high mountains and one that is significantly more prominent than in the Vosges Mountains. The *DNA* of the 16 February 1976 states that, “while the Vosges Mountains are less dangerous than the Alps or the Pyrenees, they present, in case of bad weather, and especially in case of fog, a certain risk”. Thus, in order to explain the avalanche accidents in the Vosges Mountains, the imprudence of practitioners and their lack of knowledge about the environment is put forward. This contrasts to the unpredictability of high mountains,<sup>58</sup> where “white death” is likely to strike indiscriminately, at any time<sup>59</sup> (Fig. 7).

Figure 7: The avalanche victim’s imprudence is offered as a major factor behind accidents in the Vosges Mountains. *DNA*, 3 March 1986



## Conclusion and outlooks

- 23 Eventually, even if they sometimes recognise the danger of all or part of the Vosges Mountains, actors in the media play, at best, a weak role in defining the “avalanche risk problem” in this space. However, at the regional level, their coverage of accidents produces “the construction of a historical present” of avalanche risk (Mussou, 2007) and sometimes even call to mind dramatic events from the past. But their contribution to the knowledge-building process is weakened by the lack of a precise location of the sites concerned, which prevents any risk territorialisation. Also, the use of ambiguous argumentative strategies (and even of contradictory statements between the warning against avalanche risk and its minimisation) and their minor involvement in preventive communication do not make their audiences very aware of the avalanche risk. This low visibility that they give to the risk of avalanches in medium-high mountains is

accentuated by the fact that the national news media relay almost exclusively those events that have occurred in the high mountains.

- 24 More broadly, the images of avalanches that occur in the Vosges Mountains and in the high mountains appear discordant and even antagonistic. There is no systematic association between the Vosges Mountains and the risk of avalanches, which results more from exceptional meteorological conditions (mild spell, heavy snowfall) than from the territory's intrinsic specificities. The rare, little destructive, and almost insignificant character of avalanches in the Vosges is opposed to the frequent, spectacular, fast, highly destructive or cataclysmic character of high-mountain avalanches. Starting from the assumption that the media nourish the imaginary with the narratives and "images" they convey, such descriptions contribute to a certain negation of the characteristics of the Vosges Mountains and their dangers and restrict avalanche phenomena's "territorial imaginary" (Noyer and Raoul, 2011b) to high-mountains spaces. In this paradigm, danger applies exclusively to these particular high-mountain spaces and not to mountains in general. The avalanche space thus appears to be the one of the high mountains, while the risk in medium-high mountains remains poorly identified.
- 25 The potential role of media in the process of building knowledge and representations must, however, be tempered. Indeed, the receiver filters, prioritises, rejects or accepts information and is not a passive subject (Durand, 1981). The question arises whether the images conveyed are received and caught by the public in a "normative" way, and whether they participate in the construction of representations of avalanches as large and destructive events occurring in high mountains. Thus, it would be interesting to carry out an analysis of the reception of media discourse to complete these results. Furthermore, we should also question the intentions, motivations and impulses underpinning the discourses we have analysed. Indeed, the study does not shine light on whether this representation of avalanches in the media results from the editorial, aesthetic, sensationalist, visual and/or discursive choices that privilege the destructive Alpine avalanches with regard to other phenomena, or whether it is already anchored upstream in representations by the media actors. In other words, does it correspond, even before its media diffusion, to collective representations of the avalanche socially shared with the readers/spectators or is there another reason for the absence of a mention of avalanche risk among media actors? To answer this question, it would be interesting to examine the impact of the social and political context on the media discourse. In France, this includes specifically the "top-down" avalanche risk model based on the Alpine archetype, which leads, as a corollary, to the absence of construction of avalanche risk in medium-high mountains and more particularly in the Vosges Mountains. These are two possible paths for future research. More generally, the reproduction of the study in other territorial contexts and for other harmful phenomena will also confirm - or invalidate - the conclusions obtained and may allow a better understanding of the media's contribution to the construction of natural hazards, which, despite their societal importance, have received little attention so far.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ancey C. (ed.), 1996.- *Guide Neige et Avalanche. Connaissances, Pratiques & Sécurité*, Aix-en-Provence, Edisud.
- Balle F., 2010.- *Les médias*, Paris, PUF, 128 p., visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.cairn.info/les-medias--9782130589228.htm>
- Barthes R., 1968.- "L'effet de réel", in *Communications*, vol. 11, pp. 84-89.
- Bougnoux D., 2006.- "Maudits médias", in *Médium*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 16-25.
- Burnet R., 2004.- "De l'avalanche... à la coulée", in *Neige et Avalanches*, vol. 105, p. 25.
- Champagne P., 1999.- "Les médias et les risques. Point de vue de Patrick Champagne", in Gilbert C., Bourdeaux I. (eds.), *Actes de la treizième séance du Séminaire du programme Risques Collectifs et Situations de Crises*, Grenoble, CNRS, pp. 14-44.
- Chupin I. (ed.), 2012.- *Histoire politique et économique des médias en France*, Paris, La Découverte, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://www.cairn.info/histoire-politique-et-economique-des-medias-en-fra--9782707154651.htm>
- Comité de promotion touristique collective du massif des Vosges, décembre 2010.- "Mille envies de goûter l'hiver. Le guide des loisirs d'hiver".
- Decamps P., 2013.- "Les avalanches médiatiques peuvent-elles faire avancer la prévention des accidents ?", in Naaïm-Bouvet F. (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Snow Science Workshop ISSW 2013*, Grenoble Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, France 7-11 October 2013, ANENA-IRSTEA-Météo-France, pp. 428-431.
- Durand J., 1981.- *Les formes de la communication*, Paris, Dunod.
- Flageollet J.-C., 2003.- *Sur les traces des glaciers vosgiens*, Paris, CNRS Éditions.
- Giacona F., Eckert N., Martin B., 2017a - "La construction du risque au prisme territorial: dans l'ombre de l'archétype alpin, les avalanches oubliées de moyenne montagne", in *Nature, Science, Société*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 148-162.
- Giacona F., Martin B., Eckert N., (submitted 2017).- "Avalanches en moyenne montagne : des représentations à l'occultation du risque".
- Giacona F., Eckert N., Martin B., 2017b.- "A 240-year history of avalanche risk in the Vosges Mountains based on non-conventional (re)sources", in *Nat. Hazards Earth Syst. Sci.*, <https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-17-887-2017>.
- Gilbert C., 1998.- "Le sens caché des risques collectifs", *Site Internet La Recherche. L'actualité des sciences*, no. 307, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.larecherche.fr/savoirs/autre/claude-gilbert-sens-cache-risques-collectifs-01-03-1998-73416>.
- Gilbert C., 2003.- "La fabrique des risques", in *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, vol. 114, no. 1, pp. 55-72.
- Gire F., Pasquier D., Granjon F., 2007.- "Culture et sociabilité. Les pratiques de loisirs des Français", in *Réseaux*, vol. 145-146, no. 6, pp. 159-215, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-reseaux1-2007-6-page-159.htm>

- Hervé-Bazin, C. 2014.- “Boire en eaux troubles”, in *Communication et organisation*, vol. 45. pp. 127-138, visited December 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://communicationorganisation.revues.org/4534>
- Joffe H., Orfali B., 2005.- “De la perception à la représentation du risque : le rôle des médias”, in *Hermès, La Revue*, vol. 1, no. 41, pp. 121-129, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, [https://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID\\_ARTICLE=HERM\\_041\\_0121](https://www.cairn.info/resume.php?ID_ARTICLE=HERM_041_0121)
- Martinais, E. (ed.), 2006.- La construction sociale du risque environnemental : un objet géographique ?, in Séchet, R., Veschambre, V. (ed.), *Penser et faire la géographie sociale : Contribution à une épistémologie de la géographie sociale*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, pp. 173-186.
- Mercier A., 2000.- “Principes sociologiques d’analyse de l’image télévisuelle : le cas du journal télévisé”, in Bachir M. (ed.), *Les Méthodes du concret*, Paris, Curapp/Puf.
- Mussou C., 2007.- “Les sources de la radio et de la télévision pour l’historien du temps présent”, in *Bulletin de l’Institut Pierre Renouvin*, vol. 26, no. 2, p. 189.
- Noyer J., Raoul B., 2011a.- “Introduction”, in *Études de communication*, vol. 37, pp. 9-14, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://edc.revues.org/2832>
- Noyer J., Raoul B., 2011b.- “Le ‘travail territorial’ des médias. Pour une approche conceptuelle et pragmatique d’une notion”, in *Études de communication*, vol. 37, pp. 15-46, visited May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://edc.revues.org/2933>
- November V., 2012.- “Comment favoriser l’équité territoriale face aux risques ?”, in *Métropolitiques*, p. 1, visited May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/IMG/pdf/MET-November.pdf>.
- Parc naturel régional des ballons des Vosges, Association départementale du tourisme du Haut-Rhin, Comité départemental du tourisme des Vosges, 2004.- *Du bon usage des Ballons des Vosges. Ballades d’hiver*, Obernai, Gyss Imprimeur, non paginé.
- Rouquette M.-L., Rateau P., 1998.- *Introduction à l’étude des représentations sociales*, Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, pp. 11-19.
- Sicard, M.-N. 1999.- “Les médias à l’épreuve des crises technologiques”, in *Communication et organisation*, vol. 16, visited December 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, <https://communicationorganisation.revues.org/2262>
- Solomon-Godeau A., 2010.- “Photographier la catastrophe”, in *Terrain*, vol. 54, pp. 56-65, visited May 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://terrain.revues.org/13962>
- Soulé B., Reynier V., Corneloup J., 2007.- “La communication préventive sur les risques : le cas des stations de sports d’hiver en France”, in *Communication*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 79-107, visited May 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, URL : <http://communication.revues.org/754>
- Thareau B., Fabry M., Robin A., 2014.- “Lutter contre le changement climatique ou pour son identité professionnelle?”, in *Vertigo - la revue électronique en sciences de l’environnement*, vol. 14, no. 3, visited July 13<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://vertigo.revues.org/15588>
- Wahl L., Planchon O., David P.-M., 2007.- “Névés, corniches et risque d’avalanche dans les Hautes-Vosges”, in *Revue de Géographie de l’Est*, vol. 47, no. 4, visited June 6<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://rge.revues.org/1533>
- “Le baromètre 2013 sur la crédibilité des médias pointe la banalisation progressive d’Internet”, visited May 8<sup>th</sup> 2013, <http://apcp.unblog.fr/2013/01/22/le-barometre-2013-sur-la-credibilite-des-medias-pointe-la-banalisationprogressive-dinternet/>



## NOTES

1. Radio is more easily accessible than other media, and there are many radio stations, which makes it difficult to know their level of penetration.
2. A survey from 2013 highlights the critical role that television plays. It was chosen as a medium of information by 69% of respondents, whereas radio accounted for 33%, the Internet for 37% and the daily press for 24%. Locally, however, the regional daily press plays an important role, at least for people over the age of 50 (Balle, 2010).
3. Essentially the press in Alsace, since almost all the avalanche sites of the Vosges Mountains are located on the Alsatian flank of the Vosges Mountains.
4. General information daily newspapers that have diverse political orientations and are widely distributed, namely *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*.
5. It was only possible to consider the terrestrial channels. However, a study showed that “the terrestrial channels remain the most watched and in particular TF1 [ , which] is in the lead” (Gire et al., 2007). It should be noted that while these channels have had to hand over their digitised video tapes to the National Audiovisual Institute (INA) since the mid-2000s, these tapes are not always available.
6. E.g. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 12 February 1999; *L’Alsace*, 6 February 1983; *DNA*, 18 February 2009.
7. *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace*, 29 January 1973.
8. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 1-2 February 1984, 27 January 1998; *L’Alsace*, 2, 3 and 4 February 1984; *DNA*, 2-3 February 1984.
9. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 29-30 January 2000; *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 29-30 January 2000; *France 3 Lorraine*, Midday, 30 January 2000; *L’Alsace*, 30-31 January and 1-2, 12 and 17 February 2000; *DNA*, 30-31 January and 1, 3-4, 6 and 14 February 2000.
10. *Libération*, 12 February 2000; *Le Monde*, 1 February 2000 and 15 March 2005; *Le Figaro*, 31 January 2000 and 14 March 2005.
11. *Le Figaro*, 14 March 2005; *Libération*, 31 January 2000.
12. *Le Figaro*, 31 January 2000; *Le Monde*, 1 February 2000 and 15 March 2005.
13. *TF1*, 20h, 30 January 2000; *3eme chaîne (ORTF)*, 16 March 1968; *3eme chaîne (ORTF)*, 10 December 1966.
14. *France 3*, Alsace, Evening, 23 January 2000.
15. *France 3 Lorraine*, Soir, 27 March 1991; *France 3 Lorraine*, Midday, 9 April 1994; *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 10 April 1994; *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 10 February 1995; *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 21 January 1999; *France 3 Alsace*, 19/20, 18 November 2000; *L’Alsace*, 6 March 2009, 10 March 2011, 15 and 30 January 2016; *DNA*, 2 March 2015.
16. *Actualités françaises*, 22 March 1946; *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 8 July 1964; *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 13h and 20h, 11 February 1970; *France 3 Toulouse*, Soir 3, 24 January 1981; *France 3 Rhône-Alpes*, Evening, 11 February 1999; *TF1*, 20h, 11 February 1999; *France 3*, 19/20, 12 March 2005; *TF1*, 13h, 13 July 2012; *France 2*, 20h, 12 July 2012.
17. *LeFigaro.fr*, 20 April and 16 December 2008; *Le Monde*, 9 March 2002; *2e chaîne*, 20h, 16 February 1976; *France 3*, 19/20 national, 12 March 2005.
18. *Libération*, 10 February 1999; *Le Figaro*, 8 March 2002 and 13 July 2012; *Lefigaro.fr*, 12 July 2012; *France 3 Toulouse*, Soir 3, 24 January 1981; *France 2*, 20h, 9 February 1999.
19. One report mentions that “until now, we have associated the avalanche phenomenon with milder weather. It is true, but one forgets the cold that causes faceted snow to form.” *IT1*, 13h, 16 February 1976.

20. *Libération*, 5 March 1996; *Le Monde*, 26 January 1998, 13 January and 27 October 1999, 2 January and 13 February 2002, 9 January 2006; *IT1*, 13h, 16 February 1976; *Antenne 2*, 20h, 25 March 1988; *France 3*, 19/20, 7 March 2002.
21. *France 3*, 19/20, 7 March 2002.
22. *IT1*, 13h, 3 April 1982; *Antenne 2*, 20h, 25 March 1988; *France 3*, 19/20, 12 February 1995.
23. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 12 December 2007.
24. Medium-high mountains have “snow flow alerts”. They relate to steep slopes, especially off the maintained and marked tracks. Unlike the standard avalanche risk estimation bulletin, they are not based on the snowpack stratigraphy but on the identification of situations in which avalanches occur naturally: heavy snowfall and heavy rain on substantial snowpack. *Le Figaro* is the only national daily newspaper to relay these alerts for the Vosges Mountains on a regular basis, which it has been doing since 2008 (“flash actu” 5 December 2008, 21 December 2009, 2 February 2010, 14 February 2010, 30 December 2011 and 20 January 2012).
25. For example, *DNA*, 2 February 1984, 1 February 2000 and 14 March 2005; *L’Alsace*, 2 February 2003, 14 March 2005 and 3 March 2011.
26. *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 21 January 1999; *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 12 February 1999.
27. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 27 January 1998.
28. *DNA*, 3 February 1984.
29. *L’Alsace*, 14 February 1994.
30. These are events that occurred in January 1973, January 1976 and January 2000.
31. *L’Alsace*, 22 January 1973.
32. *L’Alsace*, 30 January 2000.
33. *L’Alsace*, 31 January 2000.
34. *L’Alsace*, 23 January 1973.
35. *L’Alsace*, 22 January 1973.
36. *L’Alsace*, 23 January 1976.
37. *L’Alsace*, 31 January 2000.
38. *Le Figaro*, 28 January 1998 and 11 February 1999.
39. *Le Figaro*, 26 January 1998.
40. *Le Monde*, 1 November 1999.
41. *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 8 July 1964.
42. *Libération*, 24 January 1998; *Le Figaro*, 24 and 26 January 1998, 10, 11 and 12 February 1999, 10 January 2002 and 13 July 2012; *Le Monde*, 26 January 1998, 14 July 2012; *TF1*, 13h, 12 July 2012; *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 13h, 10 February 1970; *France 2*, 20h, 9 February 1999; *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 8 July 1964; *Circuit Actualités Françaises (LAF)*, 22 March 1946; *1ère chaîne (ORTF)*, 13h, 10 February 1970; *France 2*, 20h, 24 February 1999.
43. *Le Monde*, 11 February and 30 March 1999, 14 July 2012; *Le Figaro*, 11 February 1999; *Libération*, 10 February 1999.
44. *Le Monde*, 26 January 1998, 11 February and 30 March 1999, 2 January 2002 and 14 July 2012; *Libération*, 10 February 1999; *Le Figaro*, 11 and 13 February 1999, and 3 Mai 1999; *LeFigaro.fr*, 16 December 2008; *DNA*, 10 February 1999; *Circuit Actualités Françaises (LAF)*, 22 March 1946; *France 3 Rhône-Alpes, Midi*, 10 February 1999; *France 2*, 20h, 9 February 1999; *France 2, Midi 2*, 30 November 2000; *France 2*, 20h, 12 March 2005.
45. *Libération*, 10-11 February 1999; *Le Figaro*, 11 February 1999; *Le Monde*, 30 March 1999.
46. *Le Figaro*, 26 January 1998, 10-11 February 1999 and 13 July 2012; *Le Monde*, 11 February 1999 and 14 July 2012; *L’Alsace*, 8 March 2002; *Libération*, 14 July 2012; *Lefigaro.fr*, 12 July 2012.
47. For instance, *IT1*, 20h, 5 February 1982; *France 2, Midi 2*, 2 February 1999; *France 3*, 19/20, 7 March 2002.
48. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 29 December 2007.
49. The national daily press also uses these two terms, although ‘avalanche’ is more common.

50. *L'Alsace*, 17 March 1968.
51. *France 3 Alsace*, Evening, 2 February 1984.
52. *France 3 Lorraine*, 21 January 1999.
53. *France 3 Lorraine*, 19 February 1999.
54. *L'Alsace*, 14 avril 2010.
55. *L'express.fr*, 26 January 2014; *DNA*, 27 January 2014; *L'Est Républicain*, *Vosges Matin*, *Le Républicain Lorrain*, *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, *Le Progrès*, *L'Estrépublicain.fr*, 26 January 2014; *Vosgesmatin.fr*, 26 January 2014; *republicain-lorrain.fr*, 26 January 2014; *ledauphine.com*, 26 January 2014; *leprogres.fr*, 26 January 2014; *L'Alsace*, 14 April 2010 and 26 January 2014.
56. *L'Alsace*, 3 March 2011; *DNA*, 19 July 2011.
57. *L'Alsace*, 31 March 2008; *DNA*, 16 January 2006 and 27 February 2009.
58. *1ère chaîne* (ORTF), 8 July 1964; *1ère chaîne* (ORTF), 13h, 12 February 1970; *France 3*, 19/20, 12 March 2005; *TF1*, 13h, 12 July 2012.
59. For instance, *France 3 Lorraine*, Evening, 30 January 2000; *DNA*, 3 March 1986.
- 

## ABSTRACTS

Despite significant proof to the contrary, scientific and institutional agents present the Vosges Mountains, a medium-high mountain range located in north-eastern France, as a territory that poses almost no risk of avalanches. A comprehensive review of the daily press, as well as national and regional television news, shows that media discourses do not counter this point of view strongly. Indeed, unlike the Alpine environment, whose risk the media presents in a concrete and sometimes pedagogical way, the Vosges Mountains receive very little coverage with respect to risk. More generally, the argumentative strategies that the media use are ambiguous and on the edge between warning about and underestimating the risk. Therefore, the image that is conveyed is one of a territory where the risk is limited to a few locations and/or to particular circumstances. Consequently, avalanches continue to be viewed as a distinctive attribute of a specific space – namely, high mountains – while the question of the danger posed by the Vosges Mountains is left open. This observation should be complemented by a study of the origin of such editorial choices, as well as their impact on the risk representations among different target audiences.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** medium-high mountains, media, social construction of risk, perception of risk, avalanche risk

## AUTHORS

### FLORIE GIACONA

Florie Giacona, post-doctoral fellow in geohistory, Institut des Sciences de l'Environnement – Université de Genève, 66 bd Carl Vogt, CH-1205 Genève, Suisse; Univ. Grenoble Alpes, Irstea, UR

ETGR, 2 rue de la Papeterie-BP 76, F-38402 St-Martin-d'Hères, France  
florie.giacona@irstea.fr

**BRICE MARTIN**

Lecturer in geography, Université de Haute-Alsace, Centre de recherche sur les économies, les sociétés, les arts et les techniques (Cresat), 68093 Mulhouse cedex, France

**NICOLAS ECKERT**

Researcher in geophysics, Univ. Grenoble Alpes, Irstea, UR ETGR, 2 rue de la Papeterie-BP 76, F-38402 St-Martin-d'Hères, France