Dimensions of trust and information seeking on natural disasters, hazards, and extreme weather in North Carolina (USA)

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To understand where people turn for information regarding natural disasters, hazards, and extreme weather, we surveyed residents of Ashe, Watauga, and Rockingham counties in North Carolina (n = 79). Respondents ranged from 27 years old to 87 years old. Approximately 22% (17/79) reported some college or less. We found general preference for local sources. Most respondents were open to signing up for a phone or text alert service regarding air quality but were more likely to sign up for a local service than for one offered by a federal organization, e.g., the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, t = 2.4, p < .05. Those with less education were more likely to sign up for a local phone or text service than counterparts, standardized beta = - .32, p < .01, in an ordinary least squares regression with age and education as predictors. The most cited sources of information on natural disasters, hazards, or extreme weather in terms of frequent or very frequent engagement were primarily local: local online sources, local television news, a local newspaper, neighbors or family members (through face-to-face or phone conversations), and social media. Sources that were most often cited as being trusted almost completely or completely also were largely local. We asked a subset of respondents (n = 62) to define trust in their own words and found their conceptualizations of trust to be multidimensional. Three coders established intercoder reliability (Krippendorff’s alpha > .70) in coding potential dimensions of trust in the definitions: trust as perceived source competency, as perceived consistency by the source, or as encapsulated interest (or as a source acknowledging one’s own interest). Respondents harbored different visions of trust: 84% (52/62) defined trust in terms of competency, 23% (14/62) defined trust in terms of consistency, and 47% (29/62) defined trust in terms of encapsulated interest. Those who defined trust in terms of encapsulated interest differed from those who did not in seeking information about natural disasters, hazards, or extreme weather from a local health organization, t = -2.1, p < .05, from state government, t = -2.1, p < .05, from a local nonprofit, t = -2.3, p < .05, from a local college or university, t = -2.0, p < .05, and from local TV news, t = 2.2, p < .05. (They were more likely to turn to a local health organization, local nonprofit, state government, or local college or university and less likely to turn to local TV news.) Results suggest warning and preparation communication efforts should partner with local organizations as message sources and highlight shared values and interests with audiences.