



BIP Survey | 1

The quality of journalistic coverage of wildfires



Pressão Média

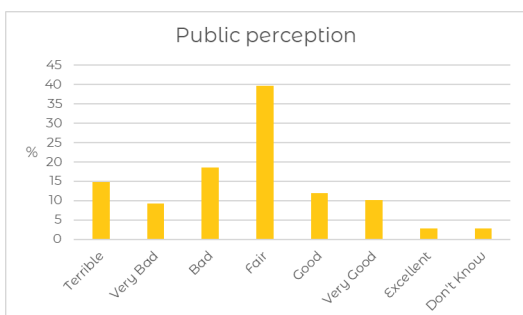
Survey question: How do you assess the journalistic coverage of the wildfires in Portugal, which has been disseminated since July 2025?

Public availability from 31 July to 30 October 2025

Respondents: 108

Sample: non-probability accidental sample (does not allow statistical generalisation)

What the survey shows: wildfire journalism is rated chiefly as bad.

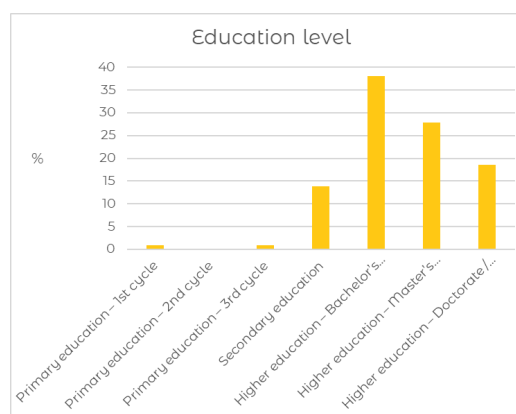


Graphic 1 – Public perception of the quality of the news coverage of the 2025 summer wildfires

Graphic 1, which presents the distribution of responses from the 108 participants, shows that 29.6% of the sample rated the quality of news coverage on the wildfires as “Fair”, making this the most frequently selected category (mode). A substantial proportion of participants rated the coverage negatively: 42.6% selected “Bad”, “Very Bad” or “Terrible”.

Of the 108 participants, 91 (84.3%) have higher education qualifications—38% at the bachelor’s level, 27.8% at the master’s level, and 18.5% at the doctoral level. This

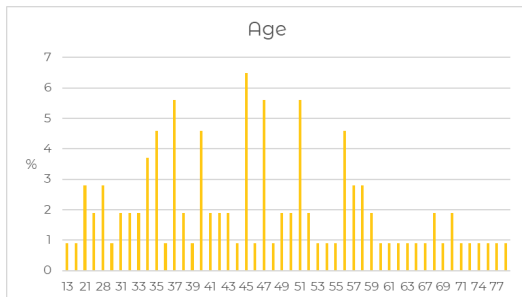
over-representation in the sample (Graphic 2) reflects the academic context in which the BIP is situated, given that outreach beyond this community is still in its early stages. Only two participants (1.8%) have primary-level qualifications, and 15 (13.9%) completed secondary education. This creates a sample bias that limits the representativeness of the general public.



Graphic 2 – Distribution of participants by level of education

Regarding participants' ages (Graphic 3), the 30–39 age group (26 participants;

24.2%), the 40–49 age group (29 participants; 27%) and the 50–59 age group (26 participants; 24.2%) are the most represented.



Graphic 3 – Distribution of participants by age

What research and specialists say: coverage focused on “spectacle”

Drawing on research into news coverage of wildfires (Midões et al., 2025), Miguel Midões, a CECS researcher specialising in local journalism, considers—in an interview with BIP—that it is “normal” for “Fair” to be the most frequently chosen category in this survey. “In terms of opinion, it is a kind of comfort zone that avoids thinking too much about the subject, or that helps to ‘protect’ us from giving a more substantiated view”, he explains. According to the researcher, this perception also aligns with the low level of media literacy in the Portuguese context.

Midões further notes that news coverage of the 2025 summer wildfires focused heavily on “spectacle” and on “negative consequences”, although “good exceptions” exist. António

Bento-Gonçalves, geographer and CECS researcher, also points out—in an interview with BIP—that coverage tends to become sensationalist. That live

reporting can “produce a mimetic effect, proving particularly negative”.

According to the scientific literature, critiques of disaster coverage identify a tendency towards sensationalism, the dissemination of inaccurate information (due to a lack of fact-checking during breaking news situations), and insufficient contextual analysis of risk and hazard mitigation (Thorson, 2012).

Assuming the classic characteristics of quality journalism—accuracy, clarity and completeness—Thorson (2012) argues that the quality of disaster reporting depends on news framing, the reporting of different disaster phases over time and a sustained focus on public health (prevention, preparedness, mitigation). Among news framing types, the author highlights economic framing (Thorson, 2012), which focuses on the economic consequences of a disaster for affected regions. This is shown empirically by Salles et al. (2025) in a study on coverage of Amazon wildfires in 2020: “the rampant environmental crisis was portrayed by the Brazilian legacy media as an outright threat to the country’s economic development and exports” (p. 9).

The public health focus is also emphasised by Bento-Gonçalves, who argues that wildfire journalism “should inform and, above all, help educate/raise awareness”. Instead, coverage often aims to “manage audiences, even if this means generating unnecessary panic, promoting misinformation (with inaccurate data and repeated incorrect claims) and trying to create controversy, even when experts are invited”.

The United Nations guide for journalists reporting on disaster-risk reduction also

stresses the link between journalism and public health. It recommends, for instance, that before disasters (in this case, the wildfire season), journalists should write “about potential threats” and investigate the degree of “prevention, mitigation, preparedness and recovery” measures undertaken (Leoni et al., 2011, p. 88). After disasters, journalists are encouraged to explore questions such as “why did it happen?” “Could it have been averted?” and to scrutinise, for example, the actions of those responsible for disaster management or the lack of funding and resources for risk reduction. A guide from the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma (Brayne, 2007) stresses that “good journalism—and above all being accurate and fair”—is essential in all situations, especially during disasters. One of its first pieces of advice to journalists covering such events is to pause, observe and listen, and to “prepare to take time and be patient”. The guide also underscores that journalists must never worsen situations for those whose stories they are reporting (Brayne, 2007, pp. 3–4).

In contrast with these recommendations, Midões notes that, during the 2025 wildfire coverage, there were cases of “journalists and camera operators at times making the work of firefighters more difficult or placing themselves in dangerous, high-risk areas, often downplaying [...] the importance of preventing such situations and of producing stories (even slower ones) that offer more content and bring something new—or even informative—to audiences”. Scientific literature, expert commentary and survey participants converge on the

conclusion that, for news coverage of wildfires to meet recognised standards for quality disaster reporting, there is still significant work to be done.

References

- Brayne, M. (2007). *Trauma & journalism. A guide for journalists, editors & managers*. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.
- Leoni, B.; Radford, T., & Schulman, M. (2011). *Disaster through a different lens: Behind every effect, there is a cause*. United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction.
- Midões, M., Reis, A. I., Pereira, F. R., & Guerra, R. T. (2025). Jornalismo de proximidade: a cobertura noticiosa do Jornal do Centro aos incêndios de outubro de 2017 na região de Viseu (Portugal). *Âmbitos*, (67), 222-242.
- Salles, D., Santini, R. M., Medeiros, P., Regattieri, L., & Estrella, C. (2025). There's no smoke without fire: Legacy media and junk news. Discourses on the Amazon fires. *Journalism Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2544188>
- Thorson, E. (2012). The quality of disaster news. Frames, disaster stages, and a public health focus. In M. Steffens, L. Wilkins, F. Vultee. E. Thorson, G. Kyle & K. Collins (Eds.), *Reporting disaster on deadline. A handbook for students and professionals* (pp. 69-80). Routledge.

Sandra Marinho & Inês Mendes

Machine Translation Post-Editing: Anabela Delgado

This work is supported by national funds through FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P., under the funding of the Communication and Society Research Centre (CECS) 2025–2029.