

## **Voices from the seismic crater in the trial of The Major Risk Committee: a local counternarrative of “the L’Aquila Seven”**

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### **Abstract**

In October 2012, six Italian scientists with expertise in earthquakes and a government official who spoke to the public in their name were convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six years in prison. They had participated in a meeting of the Major Risks Committee (MRC) a week prior to the massive earthquake that struck L’Aquila in April 2009. The court held that they were negligent not only for conducting a grossly inadequate risk assessment, but also for uncritical complicity in the media operation that surrounded that meeting, wherein the government official misled the public with the reassuring and inaccurate claim that the swarm of minor earthquakes that had been plaguing the area was a favorable sign since seismic energy was being dissipated. An appeals court reversed the conviction of the scientists, upholding only the conviction of the government official. This essay provides a counternarrative of this controversial case that foregrounds the stories of the relatives of the victims involved in the trial, whose voices have often been silenced, distorted, or ignored both nationally and internationally. Giving space to the voices from the seismic crater is an opportunity to improve the public understanding of the controversial case of the L’Aquila Seven, while also producing a fairer representation of the local experience of the public communication of risk in L’Aquila before the 2009 earthquake.

**Keywords:** Local counternarrative, L’Aquila earthquake, L’Aquila Seven, public understanding of science, rhetoric of science, risk communication

### **Intro: Giustino Parisse – Earthquake survivor, journalist**

#### **Open letter, published in 2012 in the local newspaper “Il Centro”<sup>1</sup>**

I heard the news about the Major Risks Committee verdict just after 5pm, from the website of our newspaper. I was in our editorial headquarters. Alone. I decided, a few hours earlier to avoid attending the final concluding moments of the trial. I had the same kind of rejection that I felt when I refused to see my deceased children. For me, everything ended at 3:32am on April 6. What happened and what is happening to me does not have precise

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<sup>1</sup> All the translations from Italian to English in this essay are mine. Whenever possible, I provide a link or a reference to the original Italian text. For the original article, see: <http://ilcentro.gelocal.it/pescara/cronaca/2012/10/23/news/gioire-no-ho-pianto-pensando-ai-miei-figli-1.5909311> Accessed on April 2016.

borders, and I have trouble making sense of it. I cried yesterday. Not tears of satisfaction. It was the same pain exploding in my stomach, preventing me from breathing. I saw again every moment of that night, when our house killed my kids. That scream “Dad, dad!” came back in my mind, invaded my flesh. And nevertheless, even after such a harsh verdict, I can’t represent those men, that now risk a jail term, as the killers of my children. In the last few months, even during the trial, I shook hands with some of them, and I didn’t find those hands dirty with blood. I saw fragile men perhaps aware of having made a mistake and for that mistake becoming involved in the vortex of a tragedy that ended up sweeping them away as well. No, I don’t feel like screaming my rage against them. That rage, I direct against myself. I am the reason for the death of Maria Paola and Domenico, and I will never forgive myself for that. Yes, I am also responsible for having trusted the Major Risk Committee (abbreviated MRC from now on), for having trusted the official science, a science that during that meeting stopped behaving as such. This is a first-degree verdict. It’s easy to realize that in the next stages of the trial everything can potentially change, melting away like snow in the sun. I will not be sorry for that. In the face of a verdict that will probably soon be archived, I don’t feel anything: no satisfaction, no bitterness, nor desire for revenge. When you have such a pain inside, all the other feelings do not matter anymore. This trial has been a defeat for everyone. It’s the State condemning itself. It is a State that on March 31 renounced its role of protecting its citizens, to adapt to the will of the politicians who needed to silence the disturbers. It’s for this reason that in L’Aquila we didn’t have a trial of science. Rather, we’ve had a trial of some experts that in front of the will of powerful politicians decided to “turn off” their brains and obey to the necessities of politics. It’s not necessary to condemn them today. I’m not doing it, and I hope that their internal torment – that is fundamentally different from that of us who lost everything – can be understood and respected. Verdicts have to be accepted, and I would have accepted it even in case of absolution. To me, even after this very heavy verdict, nothing changes. Now, I will witness endless debates about science having been condemned for not having predicted the earthquake. I am one of those that asked to start the investigations. I did it because I wanted to have a better account of the meeting of the MRC. Now, in 2012, it’s enough to read the Civil Protection Agency’s press releases to note even an excess of zeal, like the one from a few days ago, when they predicted the flooding in Rome. It’s better. When we have to deal with natural phenomena, especially those that are unpredictable, it’s better to alarm than to reassure. If that had happened in L’Aquila, perhaps I would have spent a few nights in the cold, but my children would still be alive. I’ve seen that in the verdict they speak about compensations. Since the very beginning I said that I don’t want any Euro for the death of my kids. There would be only one way to be compensated for what has happened to me: it would be the possibility to hug my kids again. It happened a week ago, but it was a dream. Then I woke up (Pariße 2012).

## The Major Risks Committee trial in L'Aquila

In this trial everybody lost. We are at a loss, because we lost our homes and loved ones. The State is at a loss, because this episode showed that the State is not capable of acting to protect its citizens... we're all at a loss. *Giustino Parisse*. (Personal communication, August 2013)

In October 2012, six Italian scientists with expertise in earthquakes, along with a government official who spoke to the public in their name, were convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six years in prison.<sup>2</sup> Their crime involved their actions and failures to act in and around an organized meeting of the Italian MRC in L'Aquila a week prior to the massive earthquake that struck the town in April 2009.

A press release issued the day before the meeting stated that its purpose was to assess the swarm of small earthquakes that had been hitting the area and advise the public about their findings. They were supposed to “provide the citizens of Abruzzo all the information available to the scientific community on the seismic activity of the last few weeks” (Italy vs Major Risks Committee 2012, PM Memo 2010). In Judge Marco Billi's decision on the manslaughter charges, he held that the scientists at that meeting were negligent not only for conducting a grossly inadequate risk assessment, but also for uncritical complicity in the media operation that surrounded the meeting. This included the disastrously reassuring and inaccurate public statement from the Vice President of the Civil Protection Agency at the time, Bernardo De Bernardinis, that the scientific community had confirmed to him that the swarm of minor earthquakes that had been plaguing the area was a “favorable” sign since seismic energy was being dissipated in smaller events rather than in a single big event.<sup>3</sup> That reassuring diagnosis that there was “no danger” of the big one hitting, and his recommendation that people just stay at home and drink a glass of good Montepulciano wine, helped to persuade many Aquilani that their traditional cultural practice of spending the night outside of their houses after serious shocks as a preventive measure was not only unnecessary, but also

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<sup>2</sup> Among the six condemned scientists are: Enzo Boschi, former President of the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV) in Rome; Giulio Selvaggi, former Director of the INGV's National Earthquake Centre in Rome; Claudio Eva, a Professor of Earth Physics at the University of Genoa; Franco Barberi, a volcanologist at the University of Rome “Roma Tre” and former President of the CPA and vice-President of the MRC at the time of the facts; Mauro Dolce, Head of the seismic-risk office of the CPA in Rome; and Gian Michele Calvi, Director of the European Centre for Training and Research in Earthquake Engineering in Pavia. The government official is Bernardo De Bernardinis, Vice President of the Civil Protection Agency.

<sup>3</sup> Bernardo De Bernardinis' guilt sentence for spreading misleading information was upheld by the appeals court in the MRC Trial Bis.

superstitious.<sup>4</sup> Many who were swayed by the ethos of science invoked by De Bernardinis decided to stay indoors after two moderate shocks hit the town on the night of April 5, and so they were killed or badly injured in collapsing buildings when the destructive quake struck in the early morning hours of April 6, 2009.

On October 22, 2012, Bernardo De Bernardinis and the six scientists who participated to that MRC meeting in L'Aquila were found guilty of multiple-manslaughter and injuries and all sentenced to six years in jail by the court in L'Aquila. The scientists and experts found the verdict shocking, not only because the judge found the seven defendants guilty of manslaughter and thus considered responsible for the deaths of some of the quake victims, but also because he decided to increase the length of the sentence by one third: from the four years requested by the prosecutors, to a total of six years.

The jail sentence immediately generated outrage and instantly mobilized the international scientific community to protest the implications of the verdict (Sturloni 2012). Commentators labeled this trial as a “witch hunt,” casting the citizens’ committee that pushed for the investigation and the prosecutors in L'Aquila as superstitious, pre-scientific, and ignorant as opposed to the enlightened scientific community that immediately stood by their colleagues on trial. Those commentators quickly interpreted the verdict as an attack on science, and framed the coverage of the trial proceedings as the unfair prosecution of a group of excellent scientists that were being penalized for not accurately “predicting” the earthquake and for failing to alert the local population.<sup>5</sup>

The narrative comparing the trial in L'Aquila to a “medieval trial,” an “attack on science,” and a “witch hunt” was widely present in both Italian and international mainstream media in the immediate aftermath of the verdict (Alexander 2014, Nosego 2012, Yeo 2014). The main misunderstanding revolved around the representation of the prosecutors’ accusations as a charge of missed alarm. An oversimplification of the motivations of the verdict, in effect, contributed to generating and consolidating the inaccurate narrative of the scientists being sentenced for not having predicted the earthquake, a task that is known to be scientifically impossible, as the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) also accurately highlighted in their protest letter to Giorgio Napolitano, the President of the Italian Republic at the time:

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<sup>4</sup> For a thorough analysis of this local folkloric-cultural practice traditionally enacted by the residents of Abruzzo and central Italy as a cautionary behavior in cases of perceived heightened seismic risk, see Ciccozzi (2013) and Pietrucci (2014).

<sup>5</sup> In Italy, Corrado Clini, a former Minister of the Environment, went as far as comparing the MRC trial to the one that Galileo Galilei had to stand centuries ago. Internationally, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), wrote a letter of protest to Giorgio Napolitano, the President of the Republic of Italy, to “express concern over the recent indictments of six scientists and a government official by a prosecutor in L'Aquila,” judging the charges against the scientists both “unfair and naïve.” See: <http://www.aaas.org/news/aaas-protests-charges-against-scientists-who-failed-predict-earthquake> Accessed in April 2016.

Years of research, much of it conducted by distinguished seismologists in your own country, have demonstrated that there is no accepted scientific method for earthquake prediction that can be reliably used to warn citizens of an impending disaster. To expect more of science at this time is unreasonable. It is manifestly unfair for scientists to be criminally charged for failing to act on information that the international scientific community would consider inadequate as a basis for issuing a warning. Moreover, we worry that subjecting scientists to criminal charges for adhering to accepted scientific practices may have a chilling effect on researchers, thereby impeding the free exchange of ideas necessary for progress in science and discouraging them from participating in matters of great public importance.<sup>6</sup>

The “witch hunt” narrative also ridiculed the trial, demeaning the seriousness of its context and aims, and portraying it as an attempt to scapegoat the scientists for the effects of a natural catastrophe that obviously they could not have predicted. Most importantly, this portrayal of the trial as a fundamentally flawed institutional process and an embarrassing episode for the Italian judicial system in front of an appalled international scientific community, silenced the voices of the relatives of the victims that requested the investigation in the hope of clarifying the messages of the MRC on March 31, 2009, which deeply influenced their behaviors in the days immediately preceding the earthquake.

The aim of this essay is to suggest an alternative reading to the Italian national and international mainstream media coverage of the events that took place in L’Aquila by presenting the divergent narratives about the MRC meeting produced by the main parties involved in the trial. Such a reading pays close attention to the local discourse around the trial, and foregrounds the perspective of the citizens’ committee constituted by the families of the victims of the earthquake that demanded an investigation about the MRC meeting that eventually led to the controversial MRC trial in Italy.

This essay makes space for a local counternarrative of the MRC trial that has been either neglected or distorted by mainstream media during the trial proceedings. The constant misrepresentation of the stories of the local citizens involved in this high profile case has generated local unrest and continued grassroots engagement by the committee of the families of the earthquake victims that mobilized in protests, vigils, and sit-ins to support a fair representation of the issues at stake in the MRC trial, and overall justice and truth for the victims of the seismic event. I am writing this essay to make space to the stories and testimonies of those whose lives were forever changed by the L’Aquila earthquake. This essay, thus, voices the perspectives of the residents of the “seismic crater” involved in the trial, highlighting their experiences of the tragedy and putting those testimonies in dialogue with those of the scientists

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<sup>6</sup> For the entire AAAS letter see: <http://www.aaas.org/news/aaas-protests-charges-against-scientists-who-failed-predict-earthquake> Accessed in April 2016.

involved in this case, that have already received much attention nationally and internationally.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I tell the story of the MRC trial vis-à-vis the personal narratives of the relatives of the victims that emerged around the trial and that were often silenced at the national level, because of the hegemonic mainstream media coverage that amplified and supported the perspective of the MRC scientists, and at the international level, because of the language barrier. The narratives from the seismic crater that I am including here have never been fully translated in English, and as of today only small fragments of these testimonies have been included in the international coverage and scholarship about the case of The L'Aquila Seven, which has generated an ongoing international conversation among diverse publics of scholars, scientists, journalists, and activists interested in issues related to the public understanding of science and the institutional communication of risk.

Providing an English translation of these narratives is a valuable contribution to the conversations about the MRC trial. Making these narratives accessible to the international community will generate a better understanding of the first MRC verdict, and it will facilitate a more thorough assessment of controversial dimensions related to the first MRC Trial.

All oral histories, testimonies, and reflections that I am reproducing in this essay come from different sources (trial documents, including: the verdict, the prosecutor memo, the trial anthropologic consultation; stories shared with me via personal communication; narratives collected from local media publications) and they are a faithful reproduction of the original testimonies, in translation (I translated them personally, from the Italian to English). It is particularly important to make the voices from the seismic crater accessible to international audiences that have only heard the mainstream narrative of the MRC trial, often represented from the vantage point of the official science.

For this counternarrative, I selected some of the most poignant histories and testimonies that I retrieved between 2010 and 2013, and I arranged them in this essay as a sequence of fragments that tell the stories of the relatives of the victims in first person. My analytic interludes in between those fragments are my own commentary and contextualization of those narratives that is mostly intended to facilitate a coherent understanding of the story of the MRC trial for the readers that may be unfamiliar with the case.

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<sup>7</sup> “Seismic crater” is an expression that denotes the area affected by a seismic event, and in particular it identifies and restricts the area in which the seismic event generated damages to things and people. In the public discourse about L'Aquila quake the expression “cratere sismico” is often used to indicate the urban area of L'Aquila in which both people and buildings suffered the most damages. The expression “seismic crater” or simply “crater” is also often used by the residents of L'Aquila, with a more specific connotation to identify the community of people affected by the quake and still residing in the area.

## **The Major Risks trial and the public communication of science**

Two years after the first ruling, a panel of three judges of the Italian Appeals Court acquitted the six scientists in November 2014, upholding the verdict for the public official only, with a reduced sentence of two years for negligence and imprudence in his public communication related to the aforementioned MRC meeting. In November 2015, the Italian Cassazione Court ultimately confirmed and made the appeal verdict final, saying the last word about the case of the MRC scientists in the Italian justice system.

The MRC trials generated a series of controversies in the public and technical spheres, extending the assessment of the case beyond the realm of the Italian judicial system. The first trial in particular, that is the object of this essay, because of its unprecedented conviction of the six scientists for manslaughter, spurred a heated international debate about the roles, duties, and responsibilities of scientific advisors in the public communication of risk.

The MRC communication debacle brought up a lot of questions about the problematic information that De Bernardinis communicated to the Aquilani, and cast serious doubts about the seriousness of the risk assessment conducted during the MRC meeting. The first MRC trial followed a public investigation and aimed to find out exactly what went wrong and who was at fault for the disastrous public messages circulated in L'Aquila in March 2009. The fact that De Bernardinis spoke on behalf of the scientists providing flawed information to the local residents reveals the intrinsic complications of a compartmentalized approach to the public communication of risk by exemplifying its potentially disastrous public impact.

In this case, De Bernardinis stated that he communicated what he thought had been discussed by the scientists during the MRC meeting. However, the scientists argued that what they said must have been misunderstood by the CPA official, as evidenced by the minutes of the meeting that are proof of what the scientists actually said in L'Aquila on the afternoon of March 31, 2009. The scientists also specified that since they did not consider public communication to be their job they did not get involved and did not double check what De Bernardinis ended up saying to the public in their name. In fact, they unanimously stated that *a posteriori* they found De Bernardinis' public communication very problematic. These events clearly illustrate the complications that can arise from operating under the assumption that there should be a strict distinction between the tasks of risk assessment and risk communication.

Reflecting about the MRC trials and the events of L'Aquila makes us painfully aware of the gap between science and citizens. Studying this case from a rhetorician's perspective shows that a productive way of processing this case after the end of the legal routine is to focus on highlighting the necessity to make steps towards bridging the gap between the scientists and the citizens. The scientists, as this case suggests, could benefit from learning to think about themselves as connected to the local community, and not artificially separated from it by their professional role. This change of perspective can make the

scientists more accountable for the ways in which their assessments get turned into management, policies, or recommendations for action in specific settings, even when they are not the ones in charge of communicating to the public.

Had the Italian scientists recognized their responsibility as citizens (and not necessarily as MRC experts) to communicate with their fellow citizens in L'Aquila and to explain clearly the outcome of their assessment to De Bernardinis, rather than imagining themselves as divorced from public communication and decision-making activities, they would have corrected errors in how their work was being portrayed by De Bernardinis, and they would have publicly reinforced the point that there was no new information that could offer reassurances of safety to those trying to decide whether to continue their traditional practices of sleeping outside or go back into their homes (Pietrucci 2014).

The perspective emerging from the testimonies of the relatives of the victims, in effect, shows that many local residents are convinced that the MRC experts fundamentally failed them. The scientists could have done more as public servants, and especially as citizens: they could have at least prevented their ethos from being misused to offer disastrous reassurances to the residents of L'Aquila and fellow Italian citizens. The testimonies that follow showcase this perspective, specifically.

### **Maurizio Cora – Earthquake survivor, lawyer**

#### **His wife and his two daughters died on April 6, 2009**

On March 30, 2009, my wife, my daughter Alessandra -- who had a high fever that day – and I, scared by an earthquake shock promptly left our house in Via XX Settembre 79, and we went to the Park of the Castle, where we stayed for a bit before going back home in the evening. In the Park, besides us, there were several other families, for the same reasons: the fear of the earthquake.

After a few days, I came to know about the meeting in L'Aquila, of an important Committee, that came to town to analyze the situation and, I believe, to evaluate possible responses to the ongoing seismic swarm. I came to know that the meeting lasted less than one hour, and it was concluded with a reassuring prognosis communicated to the Aquilani. I remember that, in those days, the local media reported that reassuring outcome, and I realized that me and my family had to get used to the shocks, and not be afraid, precisely because the seismic phenomena that we were experiencing were defined by the MRC as a simple and not dangerous seismic swarm.

I remember that to this definition they added a description, telling us that similar shocks of the same intensity or of lower intensity to the ones that had already happened were to be expected, however, those kind of shocks were not considered dangerous in any way, not for the people, nor for the buildings.



These reassuring messages coming from the official authorities, also reinforced by specific behaviors and decisions (such as the brief meeting, the kind of messages communicated, the calming attitude of the politicians and local authorities, the lack of organization of an emergency tent to potentially host the people in case of danger, and the lack of communication of specific advice to follow in cases of emergency) were all over the mass media during those days.

On the evening of April 5, 2009, after the shock happened around 11pm, that we assessed as similar, if not lower magnitude of the one happened on March 30, we got a little scared, and started talking about what to do. In particular, we evaluated rationally as serious and reliable (because they were coming from the experts that came in L'Aquila a few days earlier) the numerous reassurances that we had heard on the news. Thus, we decided to change our habit of going outside, convincing each other that we were not in danger, and ultimately deciding to stay indoors and spend the night inside. We made that decision because we were convinced -- and I want to highlight that we were convinced by the reckless messages communicated by the civil authorities -- that the shock we experienced was just another one similar to those that happened in the previous days, and thus not dangerous, as similar shocks had not generated any damage to my house or to any house in town before.

I want to reiterate once again that if those reassurances had not been issued, my family and I would have spent the night outside, as we and the other Aquilani have always done, and as our behavior after the shock of March 30 illustrates (PM Memo, 2010, p.111).

(Maurizio Cora, different testimony).

I remember my wife, saying: 'the MRC is so good, the experts expressed such a precise and timely diagnosis,' so yes, the outcome of the MRC meeting deeply influenced our behaviors. Before, we always instinctively went outside until April 6...That night, unfortunately, we started reasoning, and we reasoned in a way in which we would have never reasoned if it wasn't for the MRC meeting that we had been waiting for, after months of shocks. [...] Our behavior changed because we trusted those people that for us represented the official science in Italy. They used positive expressions and talked about a normal seismic swarm, and so our family felt reassured...so much that we encouraged my daughter Antonella, who was in Naples studying, to come back for the Easter break, because there was no danger, as we had been told by the MRC...and unfortunately Antonella came back and she died...she died in a very dramatic way. [...] My wife and my daughters were calm and reassured, my wife was a very rational person, and she trusted the MRC, like I did, too. I also always appreciated the CPA and the institutions in each expression and form, but unfortunately we were wrong, we were wrong this time, and we made a fatal mistake (Ciccozzi 2013, 67-69).

## **The local counternarrative: voices from the seismic crater**

This story does not hide any attack to science. On the contrary, this is the demonstration of the high regard the civil society has for the opinion of experts.  
*A lesson from L'Aquila* (Sturloni 2013)

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, during the days of the victims count, and the search for the last survivors to dig out of the rubble, a feeling of betrayal and disappointment started emerging among the survivors of the earthquake in L'Aquila. Antonello Ciccozzi, an anthropologist from the University of L'Aquila, in his expert consultation for the trial, draws attention to one among the many amateur videos from the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, recorded during the night of April 6, 2009. In this short recording, three young men, most likely students, are escaping their house in downtown L'Aquila nearby Piazza Duomo, which was slowly getting crowded with quake survivors after the 3:32am earthquake. As we can assume from the damage visible in the house on the verge of collapsing, the building's doors must have been stuck, thus the three students escaped from a window, by climbing down using bed sheets as a rope. In this video, one of the three terrified young men screams while running away from his house: "gotta tell it to the seismologists...those fools! There's nothing to worry about, uh?!" (Ciccozzi 2013, 175).

Ciccozzi notes that this spontaneous imprecation, coming from a man who had just escaped death, illustrates in a nutshell the significance of the claims made by the prosecution in the first trial. In this video, the first words from a quake survivor immediately after having escaped death are precisely a scream against the reassuring messages that they attributed to the "seismologists," or the experts of the MRC. This video shows a genuine expression of disappointment and sense of betrayal related to the information that the citizens had been exposed to after the MRC meeting. According to Ciccozzi, it also shows that the "amplification of the exposure to risk produced from the experts was not a collectively and spontaneously manufactured interpretation in the process of scapegoating the scientists during the trial," (Ciccozzi 2013, 175) rather, it was the actual effect of the persuasiveness of the reassuring messages that the people in L'Aquila received after the MRC meeting, as the spontaneous episode captured in the video illustrated.

Ciccozzi also reports that immediately after the earthquake tragedy the sense of betrayal and disappointment expressed by the young man in the video had become a shared feeling among the residents of L'Aquila. In their conversations, however, this sense of disappointment and betrayal about what they had been told by the scientists before the earthquake started to be translated into the idea of a "missed alarm." They started using the expression "missed alarm" to define the mistake that they were attributing to the MRC and the CPA.

Four months after the earthquake, with the beginning of the investigations concerning the responsibilities of the experts, the idea of a "missed alarm" consolidated as the explanation for what had gone wrong in L'Aquila before the

earthquake. This way of defining the responsibilities of the experts that circulated initially among the local residents, emerged as a conceptual shortcut to identify something that they felt had been managed in the wrong way, and then from the local common sense quickly migrated in the national media coverage of the post-earthquake situation.

The narrative of the “missed alarm” became dominant during the course of the trial on the mainstream media coverage of the event, unfortunately reinforcing a larger public misunderstanding of the stakes of the MRC trial. However, during the proceedings of the trial, the public and the relatives of the victims started realizing that the MRC’s responsibilities were of a different nature, and did not consist in having failed to alarm the people, but rather they regarded having provided, or letting stand without correction, misleading information.

### **Vittorini Vincenzo – Earthquake survivor, surgeon**

**His wife and his daughter died on April 6, 2009**



*Image by Roberto Grillo (Photographer from L'Aquila). Reproduced with permission.*

I remember that in the days before April 5, 2009, specifically after the shock of March 30, our concerns about the endless series of quake shock were becoming more serious. After the magnitude 4 shock in the afternoon of March 30, my son Federico called me, scared, and told me: “Dad, this shock was so strong, from our window I saw the building in front trembling and the roof jumping!” My wife was also scared and she confirmed what Federico had just told me. Because she seemed very worried and scared, I told her to get Federico and to go outdoors. I was firm and suggested that she should advice our neighbors to do so, as well. They went out, to my in-laws, in the Belvedere neighborhood. That evening we decided to leave our cars parked outside, in the public street, and not in the parking lots of our condo, because we thought—if something happens, at least our cars are already outside. We did the same the day after. On the evening of March 30, I heard on the local TV channels that an urgent meeting was called for the following day, March 31. Claudia and I commented on the reasons for calling such a meeting, and we reflected on the hypothesis that perhaps there was a serious situation of immediate risk in town. As many other Aquilani, we were waiting to hear what the experts that participated to that meeting had to say. At the end of that meeting, on the night of March 31, 2009, the local and national TV stations reported on the meeting and showed the interviews released from the technicians and the politicians that had participated to the meeting. I noted a very reassuring tone: we were told that the situation was favorable because there was a constant release of energy and therefore it was absolutely not a situation that could lead to stronger shocks, let alone a devastating quake. Specifically, they said that we could expect shocks similar in intensity to those that had already happened, but not stronger. I remember, in particular, to have listened to the statements of Barberi, De Bernardinis, and Daniela Stati, from the CPA. We were all reassured by the news, me, my family, people that I was meeting daily and that commented on the earthquake situation. We often concluded saying, as a mantra, that at the end of the day, the more energy released, the better, and that a stronger shock than the one we had experienced was out of the question.

Now, that evening of April 5, 2009, my wife Claudia, my daughter Fabrizia, and I were all home. Around 11pm, after the first quake shock, I found Claudia and Fabrizia sitting on the couch, very scared. Claudia looked at me and asked: ‘What do we do? Do we go out?’ I responded: ‘Claudia, but was this stronger than the shock of March 30?’ She said: ‘But I’m still afraid...what do we do...should we go out?’ And again, I told her: ‘But Claudia, at this point the release of energy has happened! It’s like the experts said, there won’t be stronger shocks, so we can stay clam!’

Even my daughter Fabrizia, perceiving our worry, asked me: ‘Dad, is this going to collapse?’ because at school they did some earthquake prevention exercises. I reassured her with a smile telling her, that for sure, nothing was going to collapse.

Then I looked out of our windows to see if our neighbors were outside, but I did not see anyone, just several lights on in the houses nearby. All of a

sudden, I thought about when I was a kid. My father had taught us, in case of earthquake, to respond by running underneath the leading pillar of our house, and then he would ask us to check if the neighbors were outside, and in that case we would go out in the streets, too. We spent the night in our car, with foggy windows, while he stayed outside talking to the neighbors, smoking until dawn. While I was pondering about these memories, our friends called us. Laura and Ottavio asked us what we were going to do. They were afraid, too, but we reasoned together about those considerations reported on the news, that the experts said that the shocks were releasing energy, and that we were not going to have stronger shocks...So we decided to remain indoors, in our houses, and that we would be in touch in case of other shocks.

After all, the fact that the shock around 11pm was of lower intensity than that of March 30, made us consider the MRC's predictions reliable...we were convinced that no stronger shocks were going to happen. At that time, my brother from Bologna called me and told me that he had seen on TV about a strong shock, and suggested that I go outside with my family. I explained him what I had heard on TV those days, and I repeated to him all of our reasoning about earthquakes. I did not listen to his advice and I decided to remain home. We decided to sleep on the couch fully dressed, leaving our computer on, to monitor the INGV webpage, and the TV on channel TVUNO, where we heard that the schools were going to be closed on the day after. I didn't even think about taking Claudia's car out of the garage. Before 1am, Claudia and I were woken up by another shock. Fabrizia was still sleeping. Claudia, once again, asked me if we should go outside, and again I looked outside to see if there were people on the streets and I saw no one. Fewer lights were on than after the first shock, and thus I managed to convince Claudia to stay inside: 'Come on Claudia, there's no one outside... Fabrizia is sleeping, let's not wake her up! I guess it should be over for tonight! Let's see what Laura and Ottavio say.' We texted our friends, and they had decided to stay home, and to be in touch. My brother called me again from Bologna, because my other brother Stefano called him. I reassured him again, and we all went to sleep in our bed, around 2am. Then at 3:32am there was the big earthquake, and my house collapsed (PM Memo, 2010, 130-4).

### **A rhetoric of disastrous reassurance: "Reassurance-ism"**

One year after the earthquake, the public attorney Fabio Picuti deposited the first prosecution's memo to the court, thus making official the charges against the experts. The prosecution's official charges against the experts did *not* regard a missed alarm. Rather, they had to do with having reassured the people, and with having provided reassurances that turned out to be disastrous for the many Aquilani who had trusted what the institutions communicated to them on March 31, 2009. According to Ciccozzi and the prosecution, the cultural perception of risk can increase or diminish the local vulnerability of a place. Ciccozzi explains that:



When defining the human responsibilities of a physical disaster, an unmotivated reassurance has the same weight of a building that is not built respecting the current anti-seismic security norms, because it augments the exposure to danger, and it amplifies the disastrous effects of a catastrophic event. In L'Aquila, people died for the unfortunate combination of 3 causes: (1) because an earthquake of magnitude 6.3 struck the town with surgical precision; (2) because some houses were not resistant enough to bear the shocks of the earthquake; (3) because many people believed to the unsubstantiated reassurances deriving from the information communicated after the MRC meeting about the alleged innocuous nature of the seismic swarm, reassurances that, it has to be highlighted, diminished the local perception of risk and increased the vulnerability of the place. Because it ended up increasing the vulnerability of the place, I define the reassuring diagnosis of the MRC a "disastrous reassurance," namely a destructive agent (Ciccozzi 2013, 139)

Ciccozzi also explains what he and the prosecution meant with the term "disastrous reassurance," specifying that a disastrous reassurance is also fundamentally different from a "missed alarm," the formula that both the Aquilani and the media had been using to indicate the responsibilities of the MRC while its members were under investigation before the trial, and that also ended up generating the misunderstanding of representing the scientists as having been sentenced for not having been able to "predict the earthquake":

A missed alarm is a crossroads without traffic lights (absence of information in presence of risk), a disastrous reassurance is a green traffic light that should instead be red (wrong information in presence of risk); conversely, a substantiated reassurance is like a traffic light that is green in the appropriate moment (accurate information when there is no risk); while an unnecessary alarm is a red light when there is no crossroads (wrong information in absence of risk). Similarly, a missed alarm is the absence of a sign that indicates "non-potable water" on a poisonous fountain; a disastrous reassurance is like a sign that says "potable water" on a poisonous fountain; a founded reassurance says "potable water" on a good fountain; and a false alarm says "non-potable water" on a good fountain. To sum up: *we have a disastrous reassurance when to a dangerous situation we associate a reassuring message* [Emphasis in original] (Ciccozzi 2013, 142).

According to Ciccozzi and the prosecution, talking about a missed alarm, as it had happened at the local, national, and international media levels, was inaccurate and it generated the misunderstanding of what had happened in L'Aquila between the end of March and the beginning of April 2009.

Following the prosecution's reasoning, we can infer that a missed alarm happens when a disastrous event is not predicted or predictable. Thus a missed alarm is fundamentally different from predicting that a disastrous event will not happen, as it had been suggested by the reassuring messages issued by De Bernardinis and the local authorities after the MRC meeting. If a missed alarm

is often associated with the lack of capability or will to provide the relevant information, a disastrous reassurance instead can be associated with a mistake, or a deception.

Ciccozzi also notes that while we have a term that expresses the presence of an unnecessary alarm (such as that generated by Giuliani in Sulmona) – “alarmism” -- we do not have the complimentary term to indicate an unfounded reassurance. Ciccozzi believes that it is because of this lack of a defining term in the Italian vocabulary that the Aquilani had initially described the responsibilities of the MRC in term of missed alarm. Having no word in Italian to denote an “unmotivated signal of normality” as opposed to the “unmotivated signal of alarm” that is expressed by the term alarmism, the Aquilani used the approximation of the missed alarm, which was the closest concept to refer to the disastrous consequences of the pre-earthquake institutional communication.

A missed alarm indicates that something went wrong. If we think about words like “reassurance” or “calming,” instead, we realize that they do not have a connotation of “groundlessness.” The connotation of lack of motivation in the composite term “alarm-ism,” is given by the suffix “ism” added to the neutral word alarm. Ciccozzi, therefore, suggested the neologism “rassicurazionismo”-- that could be translated in the English to “reassurance-ism”-- to better define the disastrous reassurance that he and the prosecution claimed that had been communicated to the Aquilani after the MRC meeting:

“Reassurance-ism” is the only term that can fully describe the unprecedented communicative performance of the CPA and the INGV, which had its persuasive peak with the MRC meeting. Throughout that ceremonial ostentation of authority, they issued a disastrous reassurance according to which the seismic swarm was slowly, but innocuously, exhausting itself through a gradual and positive release of seismic energy (Ciccozzi 2013, 141).

In brief, according to Ciccozzi, a disastrous reassurance happens when a reassuring connotation is associated to a potentially dangerous situation. Therefore, according to the prosecution, it is necessary to distinguish a missed alarm, which consists in not providing information, from a disastrous reassurance, that in this case consisted in providing inaccurate and misleading information.

According to Ciccozzi, this distinction is necessary in order to understand the responsibilities of the MRC: “it was a disastrous reassurance because the MRC informed the residents of L’Aquila in a way that was superficial, (for what regards the risk analysis carried out), flawed (scientifically), misleading (for what regards the possibility of danger), and deadly (for what regards its consequences), saying that a catastrophe would not happen in those circumstances. In addition, explains Ciccozzi, not saying ‘be careful’ is the opposite of saying ‘be calm,’ which not only implies not saying ‘be careful’ (i.e. not prescribing cautionary behaviors) but it also amplifies it (prescribing imprudent behaviors)”(Ciccozzi 2013, 142).

In brief, according to the prosecution, the responsibilities of the MRC have to be identified not only in the lack of production of a meaningful message to communicate to the residents of L'Aquila, but also in their failure to correct misinformation that influenced the Aquilani to change their traditional behaviors in cases of perceived seismic danger. By reassuring people and defining the situation "normal," and even "favorable," the discourse of the CPA convinced many to ignore their consolidated cautionary habits in times of seismic risk, and unfortunately it persuaded many to stay inside in their houses on the night of April 6.

The earthquake has surely been a necessary condition of death for many Aquilani, but it was not a sufficient one: many people died because during the night between April 5 and 6 they decided to remain indoors, contrary to their local cautionary habits of going outside. Even after the two medium intensity shocks that preceded the deadly earthquake at 3:32am, and that usually would have triggered the reaction of spending the night outdoors or in their cars, many Aquilani stayed indoors because they trusted the reassuring diagnosis that had been communicated to them by the CPA and the local authorities on March 31.

The narratives that I have included thus far tell the same story of disastrous reassurance in several different ways and through several personal and dramatic stories. In this essay I have included a few of the most dramatic stories related to the MRC trial. However, it is possible to retrieve many other similar stories in the court documents, or just spending some time in L'Aquila asking about the people's memories of the days before the earthquake. The stories in this essay are among the most dramatic, and they are from some of the civil parties involved in the trial. Nevertheless, it is worth noting, that even in considerably less dramatic cases, this narrative of the disastrous reassurance emerges constantly among the earthquake survivors. It emerges among people whose experiences of the earthquake, in terms of damages and loss, have been different, yet the commonality among the many tales can be found in the sigh of relief caused by the messages of March 31, and from the reasoning dynamics that those messages generated among the Aquilani, and that convinced many that the best response to the seismic swarm was the "rational" decision to sleep indoors, and to stay calm and inside, despite the increased magnitude of the tremors.

I have one of those stories of my own, for example. I remember every word of the phone call I had with my mother on the evening of April 5, 2009. She told me about two strong quake shocks that had just happened, but she dismissed the possibility of going to sleep outside because she felt tired, cold, and because the MRC had clearly communicated on TV that 'there was no danger' and therefore she decided to sleep in her bed (in our conversation, I also agreed that it was a good idea to sleep inside that night, given that information). Out of sheer luck, my mom survived the earthquake, but too many other people did not, as we know from the many dramatic stories of the civil parties involved in the MRC trial, such as the one in the next paragraph.



## **Cinque Massimo – Earthquake survivor, pediatrician**

### **His wife and his two sons died on April 6, 2009**

On the night of April 5, 2009, around 11:15pm my wife Daniela called me (I was in Sulmona, working at the hospital that night). She told me about the strong earthquake shock in L'Aquila, and she said that her and the kids were scared, and asked me for advice. I reassured her, telling her to stay calm, to not be afraid, and to stay home and sleep with the kids in our bed, all together. I said those words because of the outcome of the MRC meeting in L'Aquila on March 31, or at least because of what I heard on the media about the outcome of that meeting: that there was no reason for alarm, that the shock represented a constant release of seismic energy, that there was no reason for stronger shocks to happen, because the situation was favorable precisely because of that constant release through smaller shocks. That was the last time that I talked to my wife. She died with my two boys when our house collapsed that night (Italy vs Major Risks Committee N 380/12 R. Sent).

### **The scientists' narrative**

The accounts of the experts regarding their discussion during the MRC meeting, and those of the citizens of L'Aquila who told in court the stories of how the information that they heard framed as the "outcome" of the MRC meeting influenced their behaviors in the night of the earthquake, produced two very different narratives during the trial proceedings. The residents of L'Aquila told their stories in court, linking their behavior on the night of the earthquake to the "disastrous reassurance" that they had received from the institutions after the meeting of the MRC in L'Aquila. The experts, however, claimed throughout the trial that the disastrous reassurances that were communicated to the public were not an accurate representation of what they said during the meeting. In what follows, for fairness, I will discuss the MRC minutes and the controversy about their unofficial draft. I will then conclude by pinpointing how, until recently, some scientists' statements have contributed to exacerbating some of the misunderstandings about the trial.

### **The MRC minutes**

The content of the official minutes of the MRC meeting in L'Aquila – not signed and made official until after the disastrous earthquake had already happened -- does not present a reassuring portrayal of the seismic situation in Abruzzo. On the contrary, the short minutes contain mostly hedged statements and emphasize uncertainty, in opposition to the concept of earthquake prediction that was proposed by Giuliani, and to which the scientists were called to respond during the meeting. A close reading of the minutes reveals the presence of several statements that emphasize uncertainty about the seismicity of Abruzzo.

Boschi, INGV President at the time, stated: “It is improbable that there will be an earthquake like the 1703 one in the short term, although we cannot exclude it in absolute.”<sup>8</sup> Barberi also highlighted the extreme difficulty of temporal predictions of seismic phenomena and asked the rest of the group whether there were historical testimonies of seismic sequences preceding strong earthquakes. Eva responded that there were limited cases, given that small earthquakes were not recorded in the past. He also added that in the last few years several seismic swarms have been recorded in Italy, however they have not preceded big seismic events, like the swarm in Garfagnana. Eva specified: “obviously, L’Aquila being a seismic zone, it is not possible to state that there won’t be earthquakes” (Ibid). Boschi follows up by explaining that several small earthquakes cannot be considered a precursor phenomenon for stronger quakes, and that “it is impossible to make predictions” (Ibid). He also adds: “L’Aquila’s territory is in a seismic zone of Level 2, and thus it requires particular attention for the buildings, which need to be reinforced in order to be resistant to earthquakes” (Ibid). At this point Selvaggi and Barberi reinforced the idea that a seismic swarm cannot be considered a precursor to strong earthquakes. Then Barberi, prompted by Stati, the local CPA officer who asked whether they should have paid any attention to the statements of “whoever affirms to be able to make predictions,” responded:

Today we have no instruments to make predictions, and therefore every prediction has no scientific credential. The problem, instead, has to be seen in general terms, because the only defense against earthquakes has to be identified in the reinforcement of the buildings that need to be improved in their ability to withstand earthquakes. Another important aspect related to the aims of civil protection is the improvement of the preparation to manage a seismic emergency (Ibid).

In conclusion, we notice that the short minutes of the MRC meeting can hardly be interpreted as having a reassuring content. They are a quick report on what was said on March 31, 2009, and they mostly revolve around two related themes: the interpretation of the ongoing seismic sequence in Abruzzo as a seismic swarm, and the reflection about the non-predictability of earthquakes (contra Giampaolo Giuliani) supported by a quick analysis of seismic swarms, that according to the experts may, or may not precede a major seismic event.

The official version of the MRC minutes, as reported in court, was drafted by Dolce, passed to the other experts, and then signed off in L’Aquila on April 6. However, it is important to note that another version of the minutes circulated during the trial, contributing to the development of controversies around the negligence of the experts and of their connivance with the “media-operation” organized by Bertolaso. During the trial, we get to know that this draft version of

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<sup>8</sup> For the complete version of the MRC minutes see: <http://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2012/10/22/terremoto-dellaquila-verbale-integrale-della-riunione-della-grandi-rischi/390130/> Accessed in April 2016.

the minutes (Italy vs MRC 2012, p.100) was drafted by Salvatori Lorella, a CPA employee in charge of taking notes during the meeting and supporting the MRC as a secretary and a liaison with the press. Salvatori, a member of the CPA Department for the Management of the Emergencies, testified during the trial and reported that her notes from that day, which were drafted and revised into provisional minutes of the meeting, were an accurate report of the conversations of the experts that she witnessed during the gathering in L'Aquila. Salvatori's draft minutes are considerably longer than the official ones, consisting of six pages, and they are overall consistent with the version that was summarized and finalized by Dolce. However, one important discrepancy emerges between the draft minutes and the trial debates: in Salvatori's draft, there is a passage that was later omitted in the official version of the minutes, and it regards the key question of the "release of energy" through frequent small earthquake shocks interpreted as a positive sign. Specifically, from Salvatori's account it emerges that during the meeting Barberi posed the question to the other experts in these terms:

We know that Abruzzo is a high-risk seismic region. In the past earthquakes there have been seismic sequences similar to those that are happening today. What can you say about this? I have heard the Head of the CPA (i.e. Bertolaso) declaring to the press, even if he's not a geophysicist, that when there are frequent seismic sequences there is a release of energy that makes it more possible for a strong shock to not happen. What can you all tell about this? (Italy vs MRC 2012, 101)

Interestingly, of the two questions posed by Barberi according to Salvatori's draft minutes, only one was actually addressed by the experts: the first. To that question Eva responded with the observation, which is also included in the official minutes, on the lack of data about the seismic sequences of the past, and on the known seismicity of L'Aquila, that makes it "impossible to state that there won't be earthquakes" (Ibid). The omission of the passage mentioned above in the official minutes was investigated during the trial, along with a lack of a direct response from the experts to Barberi's question of the "release of energy" interpretation suggested by Bartolaso. The accounts of the experts are contradictory about this point: someone remembers the question while others don't; some of them remember considering the question superfluous, not relevant, or just addressed by the subsequent conversation about seismic swarms as not significant precursors of strong earthquakes.

In any case, it is worth noticing that a simple intervention and clarification from the experts could have prevented the dissemination of flawed information to the public, intervention that nevertheless never happened.

### **Blame and responsibilities**

In a letter published in *Science* (Boschi 2013), Enzo Boschi expressed his frustration about the verdict of L'Aquila. Boschi's short commentary on the trial

clearly illustrates the problematic stance of the scientists in this case. First of all, Boschi's interpretation of the sentence continues to disseminate, for the international scientific public, a flawed perspective on the verdict reached in L'Aquila. He stated:

I have been sentenced to 6 years of imprisonment for failing to give adequate advance warning to the population of L'Aquila, a city in the Abruzzo region of Italy, about the risk of the 6 April 2009 earthquake that led to 309 deaths. I have been found guilty despite illogical charges and accusations that set dangerous precedents for the future of the scientific process (Boschi 2013).

As I have discussed above, a reading of the court documents shows that the experts have not been sentenced to 6 years of imprisonment for failing to warn the people in L'Aquila. Rather, they have been sentenced for having failed to communicate "clear and accurate information" (Italy vs MRC, 2012) to the authorities and the public, thus encouraging the imprudent behaviors that led to the deaths of several Aquilani during the night of the earthquake. From the trial proceedings, we learn that Boschi did not contribute directly in the production and dissemination of the reassuring messages. However, his letter to *Science* shows that Boschi did not contribute in debunking the flawed information that was communicated to the public, or in discussing with the CPA effective procedural strategies to manage and communicate risks to the local public, thus making it possible for the CPA to spread dangerous messages that endangered the local public in a situation of risk and general alert. In his letter, Boschi continued:

The judge's ruling claims that citizens of L'Aquila would normally rush outside upon feeling an earth tremor, but that they did not in 2009 because a Major Risk Commission (MRC) meeting in L'Aquila, one week beforehand, had given them a false sense of security. However, this meeting was run, not by the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV), but by an arm of the Prime Minister's office: the Civil Protection Agency (CPA). An agreement between the INGV and the CPA states that the latter is exclusively responsible for communicating any state of risk. The INGV has always scrupulously adhered by that regulation. As a former President of the INGV, I never spoke to the media about the seismic situation at L'Aquila, and no relative of the victim suggested otherwise (Boschi 2013).

In this passage, Boschi shifts the blame for the questionable institutional communication practices adopted in L'Aquila exclusively on the CPA. He concludes:

In publishing an official map, seismologists have done all they currently can to protect society from earthquakes. I can hardly be blamed for the poor quality of

buildings or for people's failure to conform to anti-seismic laws—these are responsibilities of other authorities. The local CPA is responsible for accurate communication of risk and effective management of emergency situations. I did not disseminate false or imprudent information. My question is: what could I do to avoid conviction? I suppose I should have foreseen the earthquake! (Boschi 2013)

This final passage, again, repeats some of the misunderstandings about the trial discussed at the outset of this essay. While it is not difficult to align with Boschi and his perspective, which shifts the blame back to the CPA, and advocates for the innocence of the experts, it is more difficult to sympathize with his argumentative strategy of ridiculing the trial, a strategy adopted for the sympathetic audience of *Science* magazine. The stories of the Aquilani suggest a clear response to Boschi's question: of course, the scientists could not foresee the earthquake. However, they could have rectified the dramatically flawed communication of their findings spread by the CPA that had a disastrous impact on the lives of too many Aquilani.

Boschi's letter generated a response from a group of activists, science journalists, and scholars from different fields, but this rebuttal was denied publication in *Science*.<sup>9</sup> In this response to Boschi, published online by science journalist Raniere Salvadorini, one important theme is highlighted at the end: the problematic relationships between science and politics in Italy that have contributed to generating the misunderstandings and miscommunication in the case of the L'Aquila Seven. The group of respondents to Boschi's commentary originally wrote:<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the judicial interpretation, the elements that demonstrate how a consolidated logic of compliance with political power marked the tragedy of L'Aquila are clearly evident. And the sentence reveals a theme: the sick relationship between science and politics. And it does so in a moment in which the political sphere is effectively absconding. Regarding this issue a serious reflection has never properly begun (ibid).

From the analysis of the array of different texts and testimonies discussed in this essay, it is possible to pinpoint two different mistakes on the part of the experts, which regard both their relationship with other citizens and the one with the world of politics. Specifically, this case suggests that a reformulation of

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<sup>9</sup> See: [http://www.lettera43.it/ambiente/l-aquila-sentenza-grandi-rischi-science-censura-gli-scientziati-del-dissenso\\_43675119511.htm](http://www.lettera43.it/ambiente/l-aquila-sentenza-grandi-rischi-science-censura-gli-scientziati-del-dissenso_43675119511.htm) Accessed April 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The group includes: the science writers R. Salvatorini, G. Milano, and I. Margottini; the scholars D. Alexanders, L. Mualchin, M. Buiatti, A. Zamperini, S. De Martino, T. Crespellani, G. Tognoni, M. Turchetto, M. Grandolfo, A. Stefanini, G. Lo Verso, M. Menegatto, L. baccaro; the activists of "No Grazie, Pago Io," A. P. Colasacco of the "Permanent Assembly of L'Aquila Citizens", and P. Adamo of the "Giuristi Democratici National Association."

the relationships between science, citizens, and politicians is a necessary endeavor.

Foregrounding the voices from the seismic crater in this counternarrative of the MRC trial shows us that bridging the gap between science and citizens does not only imply including citizens' in the production of scientific discourse (this is an important and widely discussed theme, but this is not the lesson learned from this case). Instead, this case teaches us that one way to bridge the gap between scientists and lay publics involves recognizing experts as citizens, too, with the moral responsibility to convey their expertise clearly to the affected publics and audiences.

In order to fully eliminate the gap between science and citizens, the scientists would benefit from learning to think about themselves as connected to the local community, and not artificially separated from it by their professional role (Miller, 2003). This change of perspective can make the scientists' more accountable for the ways in which their assessments get turned into management, policies, or recommendations for action in specific settings.

Had the Italian scientists recognized their responsibility as citizens to communicate with their fellow citizens in L'Aquila, rather than imagining themselves as divorced from public communication and decision-making activities, they would have corrected errors in how their work was being portrayed, and publicly reinforced the point that there was no new information that could offer reassurances of safety to those trying to decide whether to continue their traditional practices of sleeping outside or go back into their homes. Had they done so, our testimonies suggest, could have saved the lives of many on that terrible night in L'Aquila.

## **Outro: Giustino Parisse – Earthquake survivor, journalist**

### **His two children and his father died on April 6, 2009**

The magnitude of the seismic swarm's shock was moderate...at least until March 30, 2009, when the 4.1 MI shock happened. That shock represented for everyone a sign that the situation was not normal...that day changed the level of attention of many citizens...even from a journalist's point of view...I noticed that the citizens' interests increased considerably, because everybody was afraid that something serious could happen. In fact, our editorial staff was receiving constant calls from readers, friends, and citizens: everybody was worried about the shocks that were becoming constant and increasing of frequency and magnitude.

On March 30, when the 4.1 MI shock happened, I remember that I was alone in my house in Onna, in the kitchen. I felt the shock, and I immediately ran outside, where I found my mother, who despite her poor health, tried to reach me outdoors. I ran to our library, where my daughter was studying. She was there, scared because the shock had made a guitar fall from its wall hanger. [...] Outside in the streets I found my neighbors, too, they also ran outdoors scared by the shock. We stayed outside talking, for a bit. Then, after

a while and because of the cold, we decided to go back inside. I also called my wife, who was with my son, to check on them. [...]

I remember that on March 31, we kept our webpage dedicated to the earthquake news open until we received the news about the conclusion of the MRC meeting, precisely because a lot of people were waiting to hear the news from the experts. A press release arrived from the Region Abruzzo...the message that we received and published, with my editorial staff, was reassuring. I remember in particular the words of De Bernardinis that said that the scientific community confirmed that there was no danger because of a continuous release of seismic energy, and that it represented a favorable situation. After publishing such news, I felt reassured because the information was coming from reliable and official sources. That same evening, I went back home very late, and found my wife still awake. She asked me about the earthquake, and I told her that the MRC's experts said that we could all stay calm, because it was excluded that a stronger shock, compared to the one we had experienced already, would happen. Also considering that the shock of the previous day did not cause any visible damage to our house, we basically inferred, in light of those reassurances, that we were not in a situation of high danger inside our house. In our family conversations, those days, we rationally discussed about what kind of consequences we could expect from that ongoing seismic swarm, and we concluded that at the worst we could have had some minor damage to our newly-painted walls; the reality of the facts, however, is that we were a little scared, in particular my daughter, Maria Paola. She said, dissimulating her fear with a joke: "If something will happen, remember that I love you!"

On the evening of April 5, we were all home: my wife, my children, and I. We had dinner and around 10pm we went all to bed. Around 11pm, after the first strong shock, we all ran to the kitchen, we turned on our computer and checked on the INGV website the magnitude of the shock. It was a 3.9 magnitude shock. My kids exchanged texts with their friends, but we decided to stay inside instead of going outdoors because after all it was similar to the shocks perceived in the previous days, and considering what the experts told us, we just concluded that it was normal in the context of the ongoing seismic swarm. Around midnight I went back to my room and called back the Editor of my newspaper, confirming with him that there had been a strong shock and that people had perceived it. Around 1AM another shock happened, and I woke up to call the Chief Editor again, to tell him about this second shock. I went outside my room to make this phone call, and found my son up, who told me: "Dad, this earthquake is really getting to my nerves!" I reassured him, and I told him to go back to sleep. I did the same with my daughter Maria Paola, I went to her room and I told her to stay calm. She responded: "I think we are all going to die!"

Then I went back to sleep, and then everything collapsed, our house collapsed. My children died under the rubble of our house that night. I think that, had I not heard the reassurances of the MRC, perhaps my behavior after those two strong shocks would have been different that night. Even not

hearing anything would have been better than hearing those reassurances.  
(Personal communication, summer 2013)

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