The expert view: messaging around disasters

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Interviewee: Eva Rodríguez Nieto: Journalist, Agencia SINC

January 2026

Ana: Thank you for taking the time to speak with us about your work. I work on the "Disasters Avoided" project. Our goal is to share stories or case studies about disaster prevention and to gather information on the measures being implemented around the world. We are especially interested in disaster communication, and for that reason we have been speaking with journalists like you.

Could we begin this interview with an overview of your background and experience, particularly regarding your coverage of disasters and related issues?

Eva: *Thank you, Ana. I have been with Agencia SINC for more than fifteen years. It is a Spanish public news agency specializing in science topics. SINC is a project within the public foundation FECYT (Spanish Foundation for Science and Technology). There are also many other initiatives related to public policy, European projects, open access to scientific journals, and so on. One advantage we have is that, since we focus strongly on science, we have more space to cover these topics compared to other media outlets, where there is greater competition with other sections. Our mission is clearly to serve the public.*

My area of specialization is the environment, and I have covered all kinds of topics related to the scientific field, but I mainly focus on the climate crisis and extreme weather events. I have reported on and produced in-depth features about floods, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires, such as those that occurred this summer (2025) in Spain. I usually emphasize how these events affect local communities, what prevention policies are in place, possible solutions, and how these risks are communicated to the public.

My work involves contacting a wide range of sources from the scientific community, civil protection experts, local institutions, meteorological agencies, and also NGOs, in order to address both the technical aspects and the more social dimensions of these issues.

Ana: Have you had any experience sharing positive stories about disasters that were avoided? If so, what challenges did you encounter? Was there any resistance? We often wonder whether there are ways to foster public interest in these kinds of stories so that they can become an effective means of knowledge-sharing and inspire positive change. Although there are examples of proactive action and forward planning to prevent disasters (we documented some of them in the Disasters Avoided initiative), much more could be done.

Eva: *Yes, in the case of the La Palma volcano, although it was not a phenomenon related to climate change, it has a great deal to teach us about the importance of joining forces. We reported on how the coordinated intervention of the security forces, the Military Emergency Unit (UME), firefighters, health services, the Red Cross, the island council and local town councils, together with scientific teams and volunteers, helped reduce the impact and prevent a greater disaster. We closely followed the work of the scientific teams who travelled to the island and collaborated with other institutions on seismology studies and on monitoring how the volcano was behaving, etc. But we also reported on the lack of updated seismic building regulations at the time, since the existing standards did not adequately protect homes against these kinds of events.*

During the summer 2025 wildfires, we reported that these are phenomena whose consequences can be prevented, but that the solutions cannot be oversimplified. The causes are a combination of factors, ranging from the abandonment of traditional rural land uses, depopulation, and lack of investment in prevention, to the need for training among local communities and the high temperatures. It is not a single factor that needs to be addressed. Other difficulties highlighted by experts and those affected include the fragmentation of responsibilities among different levels of government, as well as a certain degree of social and political resistance to preventive measures that are not always perceived as urgent.

What makes our work difficult are the hoaxes and misinformation that emerge in the wake of these events. To counter this increasingly common problem, we focus on presenting the experts' perspective. When a phenomenon such as a DANA in Valencia occurs, for example, we ask specialists to point out what mitigation measures exist, how building regulations in high-risk areas should be implemented, and how well the population and critical infrastructure are prepared overall. We also emphasize that climate change is exceeding the response capacity of infrastructures designed for past conditions, and that while technicians and experts are key to improving this situation, they need the support of public authorities.

It's true that what tends to make the news is the drama of the catastrophe itself. We are now more focused on solutions journalism, but without losing perspective or fostering inaction. It's about finding a balance. Beyond prevention measures (such as investments and public policies), we also need to highlight solutions like nature-based approaches and other tools that are already available to us. We are noticing that people have been disengaging from the news—especially negative news—since the pandemic. We also emphasize that disasters are not "natural," because many extreme events are driven by human activities. At the same time, we need to find new ways of telling these stories so as not to exhaust audiences and foster empathy.

Ana: And regarding wildfires, we have examples such as in Soria (a Spanish province in central Spain), where there has been a decrease in the number of fires. Pastoralism in Andalucía has also delivered positive results in reducing vegetation and lowering wildfire risk. I believe this kind of information would be of interest to the public.

Eva: *And also in the Basque Country, where the forested areas do not burn like in other regions. We recently published an article about smart grazing in Spain and its role in increasing biodiversity, combating wildfires, and even helping stabilize rural populations. Sharing this kind of information with the public is important so people can understand what is being done and what is actually working.*

Another important aspect regarding wildfires is training local and rural communities as environmental stewards. However, they do not always receive the necessary support from public authorities. People need to know how to act during a fire and while carrying out prevention work. In addition, not all past preventive measures and regulations are effective under current climate conditions, so they must be adapted.

Ana: Speaking of climate change, in our project we emphasize that climate change does not cause disasters, but it does mean we need to be even more focused on prevention.

Eva: *The public is highly polarized when it comes to climate change. Our articles on this topic receive far more denialist and anti-scientific reactions than when we cover other subjects. It is the role of the media not only to report on the disaster itself but also to address prevention and adaptation.*

Ana: Building on this point, we would appreciate your opinion on how people and the media describe disasters. In our work on Disasters Avoided, we support the movement to stop calling disasters "natural," endorsed by the United Nations and the #NoNaturalDisasters campaign. A hazard can be natural, but a disaster is not. What is your view on this?

Eva: *Yes, it's a question we've been considering—whether we should stop using that term. The problem is that "natural disasters" has been associated with these events in the media for a long time. I agree that it can give the public the impression that disasters are inevitable, purely "natural," which can lead people to think that nothing can be done, rather than conveying the opposite message: a call to action, holding people accountable, and promoting prevention.*

Unfortunately, in Spain we have two very recent examples, as I mentioned before: the DANA in 2024 and the 2025 wildfires. Society has experienced the severity of the consequences in the harshest way, with loss of life as well as economic and ecological damages. There has been a strong emphasis on the need for effective management, and the media have also conveyed that the disaster is avoidable—the phenomenon itself is not, but the consequences are.

Extensive coverage has focused on how early warning systems, protocols, regulations, and political will—beyond polarization—need to function in order to minimize the effects. We also communicate that these are not isolated events, and while we must avoid repetition to prevent exhausting readers, we have been stressing for years that the frequency of these disasters is going to increase and that addressing them is urgent.

Ana: There are several important global forums for discussing disaster risk, the most recent being the UNDRR Global Platform, held in June 2025. The organizers of these events aim to ensure broad representation from all sectors of society. But is enough being done at the local level, with the necessary participation and resources to test or implement local solutions (since the context of each area is key)? This is something we discussed with Marcos Concepción Raba Executive Director of the GNDRR, in March 2025.

Eva: *Global forums like the Platform are essential for building consensus, setting priorities, and raising awareness about the scale of disaster risk. However, the discussions held there only have a real impact if they are translated to the local level, with resources and active participation from the communities that live with and manage the risk.*

In Spain and many other countries, progress has been made in integrating civil society, science, and government into the conversation, but much remains to be done. According to experts, we need mechanisms that translate global strategy into concrete actions and ensure local funding, because ultimately it is at the local level where both risk and resilience are realized. There is also some social resistance when measures affect land use, dictate where construction is allowed, or require changes to people's surroundings.

Ana: How could we—the Disasters Avoided team and professionals, including scientists—collaborate more effectively with the media to report on disasters? What has been your experience working with disaster risk experts or scientists to inform the public about disasters? What are some of the challenges you have encountered?

Eva: *As a journalist, I believe collaboration between teams like Disasters Avoided, emergency professionals, and scientists can improve if we strengthen direct and accessible communication channels, so that information reaches the media accurately but also in language that is clear to the public. In my experience, working with disaster risk experts has been extremely valuable: more and more researchers in Spain are getting involved in outreach, offering themselves as sources, and helping journalists contextualize and explain complex phenomena.*

This has changed a great deal in recent years and has greatly facilitated our reporting work. However, it is not without challenges, as many of these specialists are exposed to attacks and threats—especially when their explanations touch on debates about climate change and climatology in general.

The recent case of the State Meteorological Agency (AEMET), criticized after reporting on the DANA, illustrates this challenge very well. Scientists who provide information on climate change have also faced threats. This is precisely where collaboration between the media and the scientific community becomes even more essential, to ensure that society receives verified and reliable data in the face of misinformation.

Ana: Thank you very much, Eva