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Living with the headlines
Student researcher explores the media reports on Fort McMurray evacuees

Edmonton – The massive Fort McMurray wildfire was the most covered media story of 2016 – the fire led to the displacement of more than 90,000 residents – the largest evacuation in Alberta’s history.

After a fearful night on Highway 63, Alana Kehoe’s extended family – three adults, two one-year olds and the family dog – made their way into Kehoe’s home, and from the minute they entered the house, they were consumed by news of the fire. “They hadn’t slept and couldn’t,” says Kehoe, a fourth-year Bachelor of Arts student. “We watched the news 24/7.”

Kehoe recalls feeling uninformed while flicking through the channels. “Every station had a map, but they all seemed to be different. It was confusing and left us wondering what was really burning.”

The experience left Kehoe asking herself about the impact of media coverage would have on people over the long-term. She began an independent study with small groups of people. She conducted interviews with residents – some people who lost their homes and others that did not – and they shared personal insights into how the media coverage affected them, what they thought the real story was and the ones they thought the media missed.

“They were struggling with something that completely consumed their lives and felt some of the important issues they were facing weren’t making it into the media headlines,” said Kehoe. “Emotions ran high during the interviews and people got angry when they spoke about how stories were told in the media, especially the stories they felt were over-dramatized.”

Interviewees also spoke about having to prepare themselves to go back to the disaster zone. “In the reports they saw in the news, it looked like everything was gone, but it wasn’t the case,” added Kehoe. The impact of media coverage didn’t end once people began to return to the city. Months later interviewees said the media messages of rebuilding, perseverance and things getting back to normal in Fort McMurray weren’t easy to hear for those still struggling.

“Seeing news that people were happy and that life was getting back to normal was hard when that wasn’t the case for everyone,” said Kehoe.

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