

Faulty sunglasses and fake news—how a solar eclipse shut down Serbia

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Fake news about the dangers to Serbians from being outside during the 1999 solar eclipse resulted in the government advising the country to stay indoors, according to new research.

Historian Dr. Vladimir Jankovic from the University of Manchester says that virtually all Serbians hid in basements, air raid shelters and darkened rooms, while the rest of Europe celebrated the celestial event.

The [fake news](#) was also triggered by the reporting of the dangers of wearing faulty solar [eclipse](#) sunglasses.

The [media](#) frenzy led to the release of an official health warning, warning the public they might experience severe itching, hypertension, palpitations and the need to urinate frequently if they stayed outside during the eclipse.

According to Dr. Jankovic, one of the reasons for the doom mongering was an article in a small Serbian newspaper, which reported that faulty eclipse viewing sunglasses risked eye damage.

The newspaper discouraged the public from viewing the eclipse. Other newspapers also suggested that the eclipse would be dangerous to the health of Serbians and even political fate of the worn torn country, says Dr. Jankovic.

The reporting led to a Serbian media storm in the days leading up to the eclipse presenting the eclipse as a direct threat to human health. The government-controlled newspaper *Politika* urged everyone to stay indoors using sensationalist headlines such as "The Eclipse and the Apocalypse."

Dr. Jankovic's paper is published in *Social Studies of Science*.

He said, "Although it seems absurd that the [solar eclipse](#) caused such panic, it's quite understandable that Serbians, who had endured a decade of 'fear,' 'terror' and 'non-normality,' were particularly sensitive to the perception of risk.

"The Milošević government's decision to release this false warning was, in part, a result of opinions formed by the behavior and beliefs of others, while paying limited or no attention to scientific evidence.

"It's a salutary lesson for us all: the circulation of information today is more complex than ever with the ever-increasing numbers of news outlets and the appearance of social media.

"Fake news created a collective display of risk over-compensation in Serbia 1999, and 'fake news' continues to affect the decisions of people today.

"The circulation of information throughout modern day society is more complex than ever with the ever-increasing bounty of news outlets and the appearance of social media.

"Understanding how information is propagated and received by society is critical to understanding collective decision making and an awareness of the trustworthiness of [news](#) sources could lead to a more honest, democratic society."

He added: "The real risk of retinal damage caused by the eclipse was amplified through media hearsay and word of mouth to a point where the government felt compelled to take direct action.

"And that happened because of an atmosphere of fear and the heightened state of cautiousness of the Serbian people and its government at the time."

More information: Vladimir Jankovic. 'The sun without a permit': Serbian solar politics, informational risk cascades, and the Great Disappearing Act of August 1999, *Social Studies of Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0306312718790812](https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312718790812)

Provided by University of Manchester

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