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# Fire Research Note No. 895

NEWS VALUE OF FIRES : MATERIAL DAMAGE  
AND DEATHS

by

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND FIRE OFFICES' COMMITTEE  
JOINT FIRE RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Since the public acquire the major part of their knowledge about fires from the press, it was decided to examine newspaper reports on fires in the London Area to determine whether space value could be shown to correspond to such things as material damage in terms of money, number of deaths, etc.

METHOD

The Press Office of the London Fire Brigade Headquarters collected copies of newspaper reports on fires in the London Area which were made available for perusal and runs of a month were examined (for July 1970 and January 1971) of each of the National Dailies and the two London Evening papers. Headlines, texts and photographs, that reported 'current' fires, were roughly measured and converted into 'single column inches'.

The 'single column inches' were in turn converted into 'space value', which was obtained by collecting a standard 'classified advertising' rate per 'single column inch', for all the papers from which a report was taken, and subsequently multiplying this rate by the corresponding amount of 'single column inches'. By this means, although no particular significance is attributed to the monetary values obtained, it was possible to make some allowance for differences (eg. in circulation) between the papers examined.

A list of papers and their 'standard rates' is given below in descending order of magnitude, except for the two Evening papers:

<u>Paper</u>	<u>£/S.C.1.</u>
Daily Mirror	£30
Daily Telegraph	£24
Daily Express	£21
Daily Mail	£16
The Times	£15
Financial Times	£13

<u>Paper</u>	<u>£/S.C.1.</u>
The Sun	£12
The Guardian	£11
Daily Sketch	£10 (now merged with Daily Mail)
Evening News	£20
Evening Standard	£16
Morning Star	£ 1.50

#### DISCUSSION

The time of fire-occurrence plays an important role in the printing industry. Final editions of morning dailies go to press shortly after 02.00 hours so that any fire occurring after this time is unlikely to be reported, except very briefly in the stop-press. Late night finals for the evening papers go to press around 14.00 hours, and similarly reports submitted after this time are unlikely to be widely reported.

For the purpose of this study large fires (that is, fires estimated to have cost £10,000 or over in material damage) were considered for the months July 1970 and January 1971. Material damage and 'total space value' are given in Table I. The cost of material damage in three fires was generally not mentioned in the press reports, but was available from other sources. The fact that monetary loss was not mentioned gives rise to some uncertainty about the extent to which the loss influenced the reportage of the fires.

TABLE I

Material damage in large fires in the London Area compared with 'total space value' given in newspapers.

Material damage	Total space value	Comments
£ 12,000	£ 14	One death Firemen injured
£ 13,000	£374	
£ 14,000	£376	
£ 15,000	£ 29	
£ 20,000	£ 34	
£ 23,000	£109	
£ 27,000	£ 17	
£ 35,000	£ 16	
£ 39,000	£ 10	
£ 41,000	£456	
£ 65,000	£ 34	
£ 72,000	£ 61	
£ 85,000	£ 29	
£550,000	£142	

There is a suggestion in Table I that death and injury may distort the emphasis given to large fires.

There were, of course, large fires which escaped the notice of the press during the two months dealt with. These numbered twenty-one in all in the majority of which the losses were between £10,000 and £30,000.

By taking 10 point averages of 'total space value' for the large fires in July 1970 and January 1971, including the fires not reported in the newspapers, for which 'space value' was assumed to be £0, the graph depicted in figure I was obtained.

Deaths due to fire were also examined and compared with the 'total space value' given to the relevant fire in newspapers. (See Table II). In contrast to the large fires, there was no death due to fire which was not reported in the press for the months July 1970 and January 1971.

The graph showing number of deaths due to fires plotted against 'total space value' is shown in Figure II.

TABLE II

Deaths due to fire in the London Area compared with 'total space value' given in newspapers.

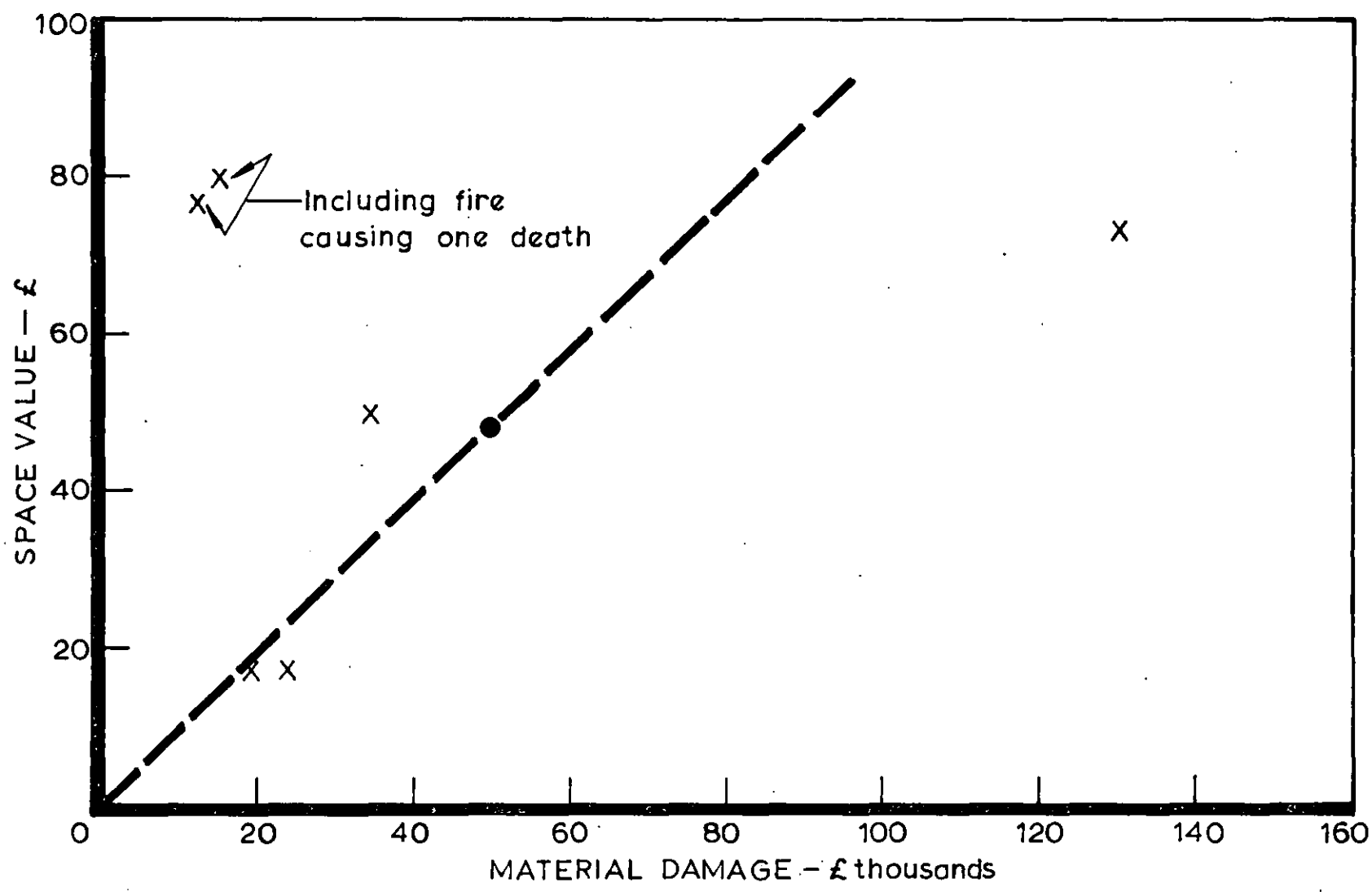
No. of deaths	Total space value
1	£ 374
2	£ 182
2	£ 423
2	£ 22
6	£ 444
1	£ 230
1	£ 78
1	£ 85
1	£ 17
1	£ 17
1	£ 27
1	£ 19
1	£ 116
4	£ 449
1	£1016
1	£ 280

#### CONCLUSION

The average value of newspaper space devoted to news of London fires as determined by advertising rates, is about £140 per fire death and about £100 per £100,000 of material damage.

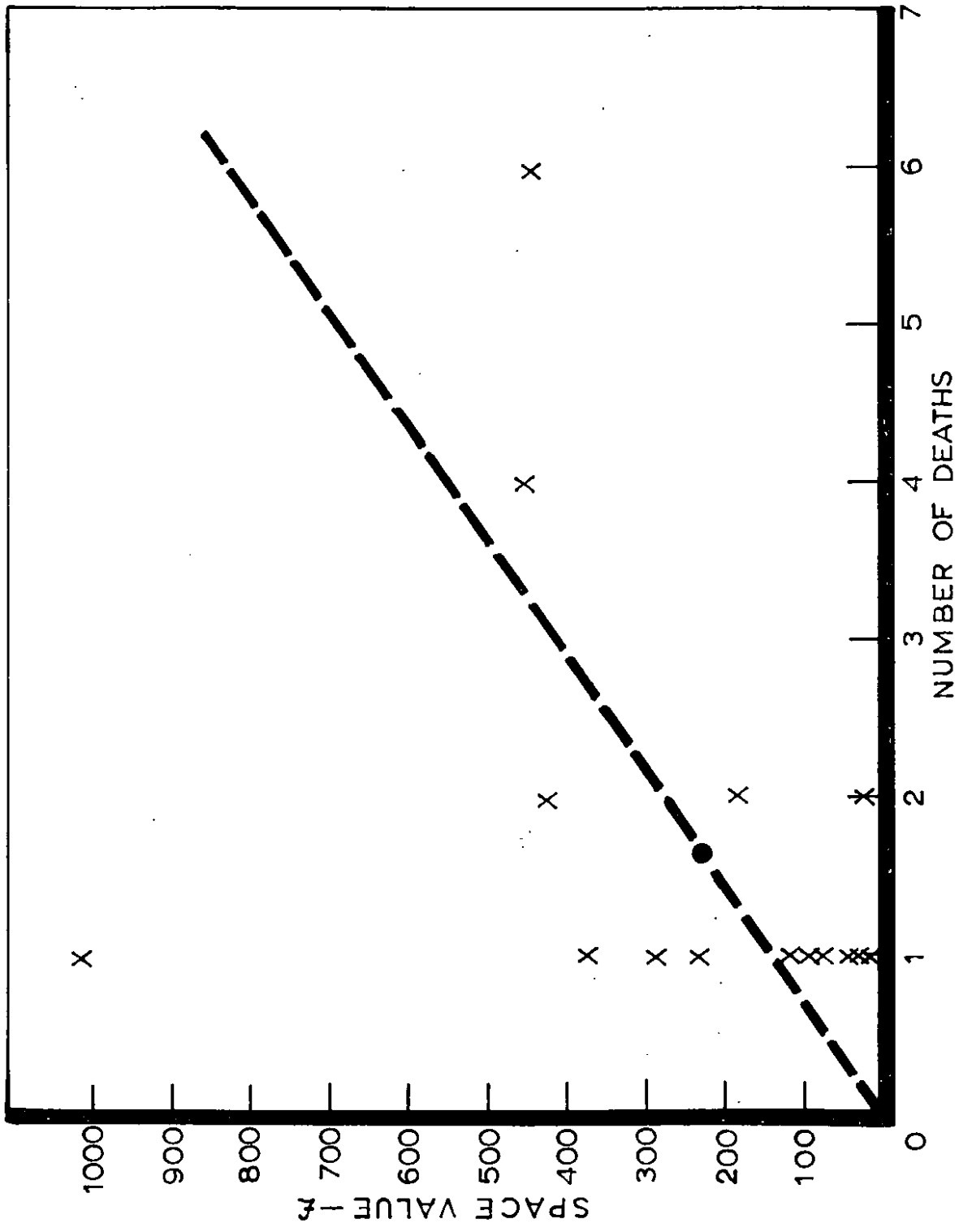
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- X 10 point average
- Average of all points

FIG.1 SPACE VALUE AND MATERIAL DAMAGE



X Number of deaths against space value

● Average

FIG.2 TOTAL SPACE VALUE AND NUMBER OF DEATHS



