

Role of Journalism to Convey Complexity of Climate Change and Other Environmental Concerns

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ABSTRACT

As environmental concerns grow, the need for a well-informed public becomes more critical. A major challenge is how to convey complex concepts and impart a sense of the urgency of these challenges in a way that engages the reader. Climate change, for instance, is a fascinating and important story, but one that has not been well told by traditional media. There are several following reasons for this:

- Climate change is slow-moving, vast, and overwhelming for news organizations to grapple with.*
- Coverage tends to be fractured and compartmentalized; science, technology, politics, and business aspects are covered by different teams.*
- The focus too often is on imperiled wildlife, political gamesmanship, or the “debate” over the existence of climate change, all at the expense of advancing the bigger story: How we’re going to address, mitigate, or adapt to it?*

Generally, the masses in public is confused about what is happening, given the irreducible uncertainties about the future, and the different messages coming from many strident interest groups as well as from scientists concerned with the integrity of the science. Global change seems remote from the average person’s daily experience, and people often cannot see how they might deal with such issues in their everyday lives. But climate change and other environmental concerns are increasingly relevant to everyone, and an informed public is a critical ingredient in the necessary practical steps and policy changes needed to alleviate the developing crisis.

Keywords: *Environmental concerns, Complex concepts, Challenges of Climate change, Irreducible uncertainties.*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that Climate change could be the biggest story of the twenty first century, affecting societies, economies and individuals on a grand scale. Equally enormous are the

adjustments, that will have to be made to our energy and transportation systems, economies and societies, if we are to mitigate climate change.

All journalists should understand the science of climate change-its causes, its

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controversies and its current and projected impacts. Start by doing your own research from established sources, such as reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the American Association for the Advancement of Science, or from local scientific experts you trust.

Thus, it is primary responsibility of journalism to read and report on the latest research from peer-reviewed scientific journals, or at the very least from reputable popular science publications.

2. OVERVIEW OF THE ENVIRONMENT SECTION IN THE NEWS PAPERS

2.1 Purpose

This weekly environment section has to be published in the Sunday issue of the leading News papers like: The Hindu, Times of India, Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Dainik jagran, Amar Ujala, Hindustan etc. to focus and give maximum awareness to the reader.

The premise underlying this project is that local communities must understand the interconnections between energy use, climate, food and the natural world to plan collectively for the transition to an efficient, resilient and sustainable society. This process engages all sectors of society – businesses, citizens groups, farmers and foresters, students and teachers, officials in state government, politicians and voters. Consequently the stories in the environment section attempt to reflect what is happening from as many perspectives as possible to provide the kind of inspiration and deeper

understanding needed to meet today's environmental challenges.

2.2 History

The National Herald founded in 1938, by Pt. Jawahar Lal Neharu our first Prime Minister about 77 years before an oldest family-owned newspaper should be in continuous operation, and should cover Climate Change Issue. Now days there many leading News papers are being placed online. These publications combined have a daily print circulation of about 25,000, with a growing online readership. The environment section is published in the Sunday edition of both newspapers.

2.3 Approach

The environment section presents a wide range of articles that aim to be straight forward and instructive. Each section consists of at least one feature article and a commentary piece from one of six "Weekly Planet" columnists. The more factual feature articles are typically local environmental stories that refer to global implications and trends, where relevant. The columns are usually interesting personal stories reflecting a particular columnist's orientation- whether energy efficiency, home building and improvements, farming, environmental activism, climate research, or water quality.

Articles are reviewed for technical accuracy and clarity of expression. Sidebars are often added to define concepts and highlight relevant upcoming events. Many feature writers are experts in their respective fields, and others often have rich experience that informs their articles. Editors / writers

are occasionally used. The author's identity and professional background are included as a byline with every article.

2.4 Team

The environment section team consists of an editor, science advisor, and six rotating Weekly Planet columnists. Feature articles are written mostly by community members — educators, researchers, policy makers and others.

The environment section team is unique in several important ways; collectively it represents a broad range of expertise in environmental issues. It functions relatively independently from the rest of the newspaper staff, and it has experienced hardly any turnover since inception more than 3-1/2 years ago. The content of the section is scientifically accurate, consistent, and wide-ranging as a result.

3. SCOPE OF INFORMATION

The columns generally reflect the columnists' orientation. The feature articles can be grouped into eight categories to convey the scope of information they offer:

- 1) Technical solutions: renewable energy, efficiency, infrastructure changes (26%).
- 2) The natural environment, including such diverse aspects as birds, butterflies, marshes, meadows, forests, stream monitoring, the land ethic and environmental literacy (23%).
- 3) Community initiatives, projects and conferences, social transformation (13%).
- 4) Educational and school projects, climate and energy literacy issues (10%).

- 5) Forestry, agriculture and food issues, including biofuels, farmers markets, composting, and the Vermont farm to Plate movement (10%).
- 6) Impact of climate change on seasonal climate and growing season (7%).
- 7) Significance of personal lifestyle and energy use choices (7%).
- 8) Legislative issues (4%).

The pre-ponderance of articles addressing technical issues and broad environmental issues is immediately apparent. The technology side, supported by incentives from the state, provides many photogenic opportunities for articles. Relatively few articles address core issues of personal lifestyle and energy use, even though this is a major challenge for a society that has grown accustomed to abundant supplies of cheap fossil fuel. In fact, the columnists, not the feature writers, have written most on this difficult topic.

The legislative category is the smallest, even though Legislature is a leader in the nation in addressing environmental issues. This perhaps reflects the slow but steady pace of legislative change as well as an editorial emphasis on the many community-level activities.

4. SIGNIFICANT ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES

Over the life of this project, many important themes reflective of the growing environmental movement have emerged. The eight basic categories of feature articles have already been discussed above. This section will expand on the three themes of

energy efficiency, climate change indices, and opportunities for public participation. The over arching theme, the development of environmental literacy, should once again be stressed as the central goal of this entire project.

4.1 Energy Efficiency

Energy efficiency is regularly featured, because it represents such a critical opportunity for energy savings. A feature article on home energy audits has to be published in the second month of the project. These articles can be written from many different perspectives: public school initiatives, opportunities for homeowners, town energy groups, local businesses, and projects by various government and nonprofit groups.

4.2 Climate Change Indicators

The general public hears a lot about climate change on the global scale: melting polar ice, receding glaciers and rising sea levels. To bring the picture closer to home, climatologist has to write several articles discussing the climate changes during each of the four seasons. The reviews of the kind of weather that different areas of the country expect for that season, considers historical trends and gives the perspective needed to understand the relation of weather to climate and the issue of climate change in general. Many feature articles to be written by climate scientist, have to be examined with local indicators of climate change, including changes in plant and animal species, and such climate trends as freeze dates, the length of the growing season, the frozen

duration of small lakes, and the onset of spring.

5. JOURNALISTS SHOULD REPORT ON SOLUTIONS NOT JUST DOOM AND GLOOM

5.1 Use Reporting Aides

If possible, grab people's attention using polls on climate change issues, special investigative reports, graphics to help explain complex data, and of course video, audio and photos. If your budget is tight, consider using social media sites to help with polling and promotion and using video blogs for interviews.

5.2 Use Different Sources

Too often, journalists only report what they hear from government officials speaking at conferences. Scientists are also excellent sources — they generally share your pursuit of the truth. But, try to explain what they are saying in everyday terms. Remember to include the voices of other stakeholders, whether local villagers, non-governmental organisations or top business people. They all have insights to offer.

5.3 If officials and scientists mistrust you, be persistent

Try approaching them directly (perhaps at conferences and seminars) to ask the more probing questions that they often won't discuss in public speeches. For highly technical content, you could let a scientist review your draft. This should help you gain trust. But, it is not advisable for more general content or with more opinionated sources from a global issue to a local story

5.4 *Most audiences naturally want to know how they will be affected by climate change?*

The problem is getting meaningful scientific information for specific localities because, apart from some generally well-understood effects like rising sea levels, climate models become less accurate at smaller scales.

6. CONCLUSION

From the above review, it is particularly found true for journalists in the developing world, where the issue generally goes under-reported despite the fact that the poorest countries are most vulnerable to climate change. Communicating uncertainty Climate change is the result of a huge unplanned ‘experiment’ that is releasing masses of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Scientists try to understand it by combining current and historical data with increasingly sophisticated computer models. They look for potential feedback effects that might dampen or exacerbate global warming. The complex unpredictability makes climate change a particularly uncertain science. Here is how to avoid some reporting pitfalls. Following points are taken into consideration while reporting the complexity of Climate Change:

i) **Don’t give in to sensationalism.**

Reporters must often balance editors wanting screaming headlines against scientists’ warnings of uncertainty. Don’t be tempted to sensationalize-it’s better to have an accurate story with nuance

than a misleading one that gets you on the front page.

ii) **Make the distinction between individual weather events and climate change.**

Climate is the average weather over a long time. A few extreme weather events don’t confirm or refute climate change and it is usually wrong to attribute individual weather events directly to climate change. But, if you are covering a story about, say, a devastating cyclone, it is appropriate to contact climatologists or weather experts and report their views on likely trends.

iii) **Learn how to convey risk.**

Climate change scientists usually talk about levels of risk. How do you convey this to the public? The IPCC’s terminology may help — the panel gives lay terms for the numerical values it uses for risk. For instance, the latest IPCC assessment reports that human actions are “very likely” the cause of climate change, meaning there is at least a 90 per cent likelihood that this is true. By the same token, “likely” means at least a 66 per cent likelihood, and “more likely than not” means greater than 50 per cent.

iv) **Avoid false balance.**

Some journalists, trying to be fair and balanced, report the views of climate change sceptics as a counterweight to climate change stories. But, this can be a false balance if minority views are given equal prominence to well-accepted science. For example, an overwhelming majority of climatologists believe that average global temperatures have risen compared to pre-1800s levels

and that human activity is a significant factor in this. Of course, it is good to air all sorts of views, if they are placed into context. So, if you report climate change sceptics' views, also describe their credentials and whether there is a minority opinion.

v) Selling the story Journalists must make their reports both accurate and appealing. There are many ways to make a good story out of climate change.

vi) Use different angles. Climate change is also a political, business, science, human rights, energy and technology story. Look into all these different angles (and more), and pitch them to different editors. Editors and producers in turn could assign climate change stories to journalists throughout their news organisations, whatever their areas of expertise.

vii) Report on solutions. If journalists don't also report on the ways to mitigate and adapt to climate change, the public is likely to throw up their hands and lose interest.

It is well known fact that stories to interesting people, places and topics is especially useful when reporting on solutions or habitats, plants or animals threatened by climate change. Thus, give the issue a face and a voice.

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