

# Climate change: How to report the story of the century

## Communicating uncertainty

### Selling the story

### From a global issue to a local story

### Above all, take heart

**Reporting on climate change is an important but challenging task. *James Fahn* explains how to make your stories both accurate and engaging.**

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 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.

Read and report on the latest research from peer-reviewed scientific journals, or at the very least from reputable popular science publications.

This is particularly 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.

This complex unpredictability makes climate change a particularly uncertain science. Here's how to avoid some reporting pitfalls.

**Don't give in to sensationalism.** Reporters must often balance editors wanting screaming headlines against scientists' warnings of uncertainty. Don't be tempted to sensationalise — it's better to have an accurate story with nuance than a misleading one that gets you on the front page.

**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're covering a story about, say, a devastating cyclone, it is appropriate to contact climatologists or weather experts and report their views on likely trends.

**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.

**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's 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 theirs is a minority opinion.

## 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.

**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.

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

**Tie stories to interesting people, places and topics.** This is especially useful when reporting on solutions or habitats, plants or animals threatened by climate change. Give the issue a face and a voice.

**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.



**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're saying in everyday terms. Remember to include the voices of other stakeholders, whether local villagers, nongovernmental organisations or top business people. They all have insights to offer.

Journalists should report on solutions, not just doom and gloom

*SciDev.Net/Nightingale*

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's not advisable for more general content or with more opinionated sources.

## From a global issue to a local story

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.

But there are many other ways to give climate change a local focus.

**Local voices.** Interviewing ordinary citizens and giving a voice to those most vulnerable to climate change is an important role for journalists, particularly in developing countries. The poorest communities are most at risk. They may already be struggling to survive and have few resources to adapt. Yet their views generally go unreported in the global coverage of climate change.

**Compare local and global causes.** Many of climate change's projected impacts — increased flooding or landslides, reduced fresh water supply, changes in animal and plant populations — can also be caused by local environmental change such as deforestation, road building or unsustainable hunting and gathering.

Check for local environmental changes and look for research that could explain how much they stem from local and/or global causes. Be careful not to simply assume they are caused by climate change. Unfortunately, there are often no clear answers, so once again you must provide good context and explain the uncertainties involved — local scientists might be able to help with this.

**Explain adaptation.** Many stories on climate change, particularly in developing countries, will be about how cities, communities and people can adapt. In some cases this may mean building major new infrastructure or early warning systems. But often it will involve better environmental practices: protecting coastal ecosystems, wetlands and forests; or ensuring sustainable land use and disaster preparedness. And it will always mean changing the way people think, so they can consider possible climate change in their daily decisions. Building this awareness is another crucial role for the media.

**Follow the money.** How to pay for climate change adaptation and mitigation in developing countries is already a major and controversial topic. Focusing on these issues, such as how National Action Plans for Adaptation will be funded, is a good way to localise stories and give them a harder edge, particularly given the global financial crisis.

**Be a watchdog.** You could also investigate whether organisations in your country are complying with regulations — particularly as developing countries carry out more mitigation projects under the Clean Development Mechanism and other carbon trading instruments. Government compliance will also become important if future international agreements impose more conditions on developing countries' greenhouse gas emissions.

**Reporting from global conferences.** Attending a global climate summit can seem overwhelming, with so many people to meet and events to attend. So getting to know some sources in your country's delegation or finding other local attendees can be useful as they can often help you find and assess information. Report on and analyse your government's stance on treaty negotiations. And rather than trying to cover everything, pick a few topics to follow closely. Also check what your fellow journalists are hearing from their own country delegations — you may end up knowing more about the pace of negotiations than your own delegates.



Journalists at the  
Bali Climate  
Change Summit in  
2007

*Internews/James  
Fahn*

**Above all, take heart**

If covering climate change seems challenging, remember that the media has come a long way in its coverage. Yes, there is still much uncertainty, but far less than there used to be. And it's also a fascinating topic.

While attempts to tackle the problems can seem frustratingly slow and politically fraught, climate change is now being taken much more seriously, with a global treaty governing emissions and a new agreement likely by the end of this year. The media is finally starting to give the subject the attention it deserves: climate change has become a front page story and looks set to stay there for a long time to come.

*James Fahn is the global director for environmental programs at Internews, which operates the Earth Journalism Network (<http://www.internews.org/ejn>). He is based in Thailand.*

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