

The role of African journalists in shaping climate change discourse

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The influence of media in the climate crisis

Several studies on climate change journalism have found that the media plays a crucial role in informing and educating the public about the climate crisis. They have also stressed that the media is many people's primary source of news on climate change. Apart from being the main source, the media plays a critical role in that people tend to believe and act on the information they get from the media.

In Africa, however, media coverage of climate change has been inadequate, leading some researchers to lament that the extent of the crisis posed by climate change is not matched by the amount of media reporting the continent's media affords the climate crisis.

Needless to say, the continent is more vulnerable to the effects of climate change owing to geographical realities and poor infrastructure.

It has also been suggested that most media reports in Africa are sourced from international news agencies, primarily from Western countries. This has created a scenario where the reports have largely conveyed

The Climate Reporting Toolkit aims to stimulate the continent's media interest in climate change journalism. It is only a start, and the goal is to close the gap created by the lack of climate journalism education and training in the continent's journalism schools.

Western perspectives of the climate crisis and contain very few African viewpoints. These stories from the West create a psychological distance where African news consumers end up believing that climate change is not happening in their regions. Therefore, they have no role to play in addressing it. This is a serious problem in that, although climate change is a global problem, its impacts are local and its solutions depend on individuals and local communities.

This calls for a relook at how the continent's media approaches climate change reporting. It needs to prioritize local news on the crisis, use local sources, and put forward Africa's narratives on how to address global warming.

The important role of climate change journalism

Climate change is a complex subject. The media has been reporting on various aspects of climate change since the 19th century, mainly discussing writings about the connections between weather and climate.

The coverage increased in the 1950s when scientists from various countries accelerated their research into observable changes in the global climate mainly characterized by increased warming of the Earth's atmosphere.

Climate change gained prominence in the 1980s to a point

The most important message this toolkit seeks to convey is that African journalists should look for and find climate change stories in their own communities and reduce their reliance on stories from the West. Reporting in this manner can adequately inform and educate local communities on the crisis and encourage action in response to global warming.

where the United Nations took up the issue and created structures to address it. The subject became a political and policy issue internationally, leading the media to increase its coverage.

With the effects of climate change being felt in many countries around the world and international conferences on climate change gaining momentum, media attention increased. The world saw the first major media interest in climate change in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997, when 3,500 journalists from over 400 media entities representing 160 countries descended on the city to cover the discussions that led to the Kyoto Protocol.

Journalism's role in communicating the climate crisis is accentuated by the fact that public perceptions of climate change tend to be intertwined with media representations of the crisis.

Media coverage of climate change not only informs the public about the issues involved, it specifically helps with:



Conveying the scientific consensus that the global temperature has increased in recent decades and that this is caused by human activity through the emission of greenhouse gases.



Encouraging people and communities to take action in response to climate change through individual and collective behavior change.



Helping affected communities understand the source of their predicament and encourage them to undertake mitigation and adaptation action.



Helping communities understand climate change issues and enable them to meaningfully take part in policy debates on the subject.

Reporting on climate change

Climate change journalism plays the crucial role of mediating between the different groups in society. The media frames climate change issues for politicians and members of the public alike, helping them to understand the many nuances inherent in global warming.

Positive media framing allows audiences to better construct climate change in their minds and decide on positive action. On the other hand, negative framing can have the effect of misinforming and disinforming the audience, leading them to reject the notion of climate change or resist calls for taking action to address it.

Important skills in covering climate change

Climate change is a complex subject that involves scientific terminology that is not familiar to the average journalist, let alone most media audiences.

Indeed, various studies have blamed poor media coverage of climate change in Africa for a lack of understanding of the issue among journalists.

One criticism that has been leveled against climate change journalism is that it has tended to be characterized by reporting on adverse weather events and climate disasters, followed closely by conferences and scientific reports. Although this may be informative and helpful, this sort of reporting has not resonated with some audiences.

Reporting on climate disasters has, for example, had the effect of shocking audiences by conveying a doom-and-gloom picture of climate change that is without hope for the future. Reporting on climate conferences can be equally unhelpful. Since these events tend to discuss highly complex, niche, top-level international

policy issues, they are beyond the reality of most audiences, leaving ordinary people feeling they have no role to play in addressing the climate crisis.

These concerns require climate change journalism to adopt a 'solutions journalism' approach which exposes individuals and communities to the immense opportunities inherent in addressing climate change, such as sustainable energy, new industries, job creation, and healthy environments, over and above a sustainable Earth.

Using this approach, climate change news stories should guide individuals and communities to see a role for themselves in addressing the crisis.

Essential climate change terms defined

Climate change: Significant, long-term changes in the global climate. It is not interchangeable with 'weather' which refers to short-term changes in the general condition of the atmosphere at a particular and in a particular place, with regard to local temperature, moisture, cloud cover etc.

Anthropogenic climate change: Climate change caused by human activities through the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, gas, methane etc.

Greenhouse gasses (GHGs): The gasses in the Earth's atmosphere that trap heat from the sun.

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions: One of the greenhouse gasses that is released from burning of fossil fuels and industrial processes. It includes carbon dioxide produced during consumption of solid, liquid and gas fuels and gas flaring.

Because of this poor understanding, climate reporters have tended to cover easy topics such as adverse weather events, including storms and droughts, caused by climate change. They also opt to cover climate conferences and the release of scientific reports, avoiding reporting on more complex topics that link day-to-day issues to climate change.

This approach to reporting climate change is inadequate if we hope to properly educate media audiences. Climate change has implications far beyond weather events and conferences, affecting health, economies, agriculture, food, migration, politics, peace and security, among others.

Climate change reporting does not necessarily require highly advanced scientific knowledge or qualifications, but some basic scientific understanding of the subject is crucial.

Global warming: The average temperature of the Earth's atmosphere increases because an increased amount of energy (heat) striking the earth from the sun is being trapped in the atmosphere and not radiated out into space. Global warming causes climate change.

Mitigation: The reduction of the flow of heat trapping greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere, mainly by reducing the sources of these gasses from the burning of fossil fuels.

Adaptation: The process of putting measures in place to ensure resilience against the impacts of climate change. These impacts can be current or impacts expected in the future. Adaptation aims to limit or avoid harm to people and social infrastructure, while exploiting any opportunities inherent in measures to fight global warming.

Ideally, climate change should be mainstreamed into other journalism beats as the effects of global warming can be felt in most human activities and therefore have implications for many reporting beats, from industry and finance to politics and development. This means reporters of all beats should be trained and conscientized to

find climate change angles in stories in their beats.

Climate change should not be reported as a niche-audience news genre in the same way as beats such as finance and engineering might be. Global warming is of concern to all people in society; therefore, all news consumers, not just niche audiences, need to be exposed to information about the issue.

Here are some of the issues that reporting on climate change has to consider:



Climate change is a broad topic capable of being reported in various fields of journalism. There are climate stories relevant to just about every beat. It is no longer an exclusive domain of the science or environment reporter. Nonetheless, it helps if a newsroom has one or more designated climate change reporters.



A basic understanding of climate change and climate science is essential for climate change coverage. However, it is important to note that climate change is not merely about the physical science behind global warming but also its impacts and solutions to the human and environmental crisis it creates.



Reporting about weather disasters or policy conferences related to climate change is great, but not enough. Climate journalism has to gather the views of communities that experience climate change every day and devise resilience solutions. This sort of reporting will spread the message about good practices in dealing with climate change and will encourage action in response by the broader society.



The story of climate change evolves every day with new information being published by scientists, policymakers, and other stakeholders. It also involves a lot of data which changes regularly. This demands that climate journalists keep up to date with the latest information and evolving trends on the subject.

In short, any skilled journalist should be able to report on climate change if they understand that there are climate change stories in every beat. Basic training on the science behind climate change and the policies and other matters inherent in the subject would complete the skills necessary to adequately report on climate change.



The common climate change story has been one filled with gloomy statistics. This sort of information shocks news consumers and sometimes makes them feel that the crisis is so huge there is nothing they can do about it as individuals or communities. In this regard, it is important to report in a way that looks for a silver lining in the climate crisis. For instance, if such a report included information on how catastrophe could be averted by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, it could leave audiences feeling that there is a way out of the crisis and that they have a role to play.



One criticism that has been leveled against climate change journalism in Africa is that it is overly reliant on information obtained from Western news networks. Such information, it has been said, approaches climate change from a Western perspective, ignoring African approaches to the climate crisis. Consuming such reports, some audiences have tended to be left with the impression that the crisis is not on the continent but in other parts of the world, far away from them. This approach needs to change and be replaced by one that approaches climate change from the local perspective. African scientists and other stakeholders need to be prioritized in reporting so as to contextualize the crisis and solutions as something that involves the continent's people.

Mistakes to be avoided in climate change journalism

Some journalists and media houses hold the incorrect perception that covering climate change is about reporting on the potential catastrophic impacts of climate change. Indeed, some journalists and newsrooms prefer this sort of news because it will shock audiences and drive the consumption of their news.

Research has found that the claims of scientists about the future impacts of global warming also get distorted by the media in an effort to make them more sensational. The media has been blamed for preferring to publish extreme views, which can result in the portrayal of risks well beyond the claims being made by consensus scientists.

Researchers have argued that journalists tend to overemphasize the most extreme outcomes of climate change from a range of possibilities reported in scientific articles.

In short, there is a tendency to sensationalize climate change news. This is uncalled for and should be avoided.

Another issue that has arisen in media coverage of climate change is that of balancing the views of consensus science

which has proven the existence of climate change, with the views of denialists and contrarians.

Balanced reporting is the cornerstone of journalism which insists that all sides of a story should be given equitable treatment in reporting. However, in climate change reporting, it has been argued that giving the same treatment to empirical climate science, on the one hand, and contrarians' views, on the other, is a false balance.

Some scholars have argued that, unlike political ideology where there is no right or wrong, but a person's views, climate change is a scientifically proven subject for which the only correct view is that climate change is a reality.

Climate journalism should avoid presenting climate change as being a balance between opposing viewpoints as this is not what the evidence supports.

Since the debate on whether climate change is a reality or not seems to be dissipating, contemporary discourses focus on what should be done to reverse global warming. Here, the views and options are far and wide.

Unfortunately, some players have resorted to unscrupulous means to avoid undertaking action in response to climate change. This is often done in defense of financial, political or social interests.

This is where climate journalism needs to be aware of gimmicks that are created to deceive people into believing that the protagonists are serious about addressing climate change when they are actually the opposite. These gimmicks include obstructionism, obfuscation, greenwashing, astroturfing, and fake news, among others.



Obstructionism...

means to obstruct action against climate change. The main culprits of this practice are fossil fuel companies and other entities with interests in industries that depend on fossil fuels.



Obfuscation...

refers to making climate change information too difficult to understand to discourage people from developing an interest in the issues concerned. Fossil fuel companies have been found to make use of this approach.



Greenwashing...

involves making false or exaggerated claims about addressing climate change so that people believe a company's products or services have a positive effect in the fight against climate change. This too is largely practiced by businesses with interests in fossil fuels and other GHGs.



Astroturfing...

is where supposedly grassroots-based community groups are conceived, created, and/or funded by corporations, industry trade associations, political interests, or public relations firms to run campaigns in opposition to climate change action. These groupings could be mistaken for genuine campaigners representing grassroots views yet they are at the service of anti-climate action interests.



Fake news in climate change...

refers to fabricated information that mimics the appearance of legitimate reporting but is intended to mislead consumers. Climate journalists have to ensure, at all times, that their sources are credible. They also need to develop critical thinking to be able to protect themselves from fake news. Social media is a major source of fake news. Climate journalists need to approach every climate story in social media with caution.



Climate journalism needs to avoid being deceived into publicizing actions that fall within these categories of misleading actions. Journalists who fail to do so would be doing a disservice to society and the fight against climate change.

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About this article

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