

## **ENVIRONMENT: FROM GLOBAL WARNINGS TO MEDIA ALERT**

### **VENICE DECLARATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING**

#### **General Remarks**

The world has entered a period in which the scale, complexity and speed of change caused by human activities threaten the fragile environmental and ecological systems of the planet on which we depend.

While scientists continue to argue about how global warming will manifest itself and what measures should be taken to slow or even reverse it, it is generally accepted that climate change has serious political and economic dimensions.

Scientists have warned about the negative impacts of climate change for many years, but governments, political elites and societies have generally proven unable to act to prevent them.

It is therefore urgent that the world community – nation states, international governmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations – should agree on strategies and action to avert irreversible damage to our world's eco-systems brought about by accelerating climate change. It is a crisis that includes depletion of energy resources; diminishing availability of fresh water; degradation of environments across the world; extinction of species; food shortages, persistent poverty, public health emergencies; and so on. In addition, global population is in the midst of a transition from explosive and unrestrained growth to a new paradigm of development and sustainability never before experienced by humankind. These problems, in addition to their environmental dimension, increase the potential for violent political conflict.

There is, however, cause for optimism if we act now. Numerous positive solutions to the global environmental change proposed by science and made possible by innovations in technology, the potential inherent in global civil society organization and by citizens groups everywhere in the world; and contributions from socially responsible business leaders can make it possible for us to provide for a decent and full life for all, and for generations to come, within the limits of our planet's resources.

## **Recommendations for Journalists on the Environment:**

The function of journalism in the debate over climate change is to distill the essential facts of climate change and explain them to their audiences. Investigative journalism should push politicians and scientists to inform the public of the facts as they are known. It is a disservice for journalists to report merely on “opinions” about climate change, as opinions are often uninformed or biased, falsehood dressed as fact. In a world of relentless public relations spin and political bluster, the media have a central responsibility to reclaim the truth about climate change.

News organizations should be active participants in the debate over global warming rather than simple spectators. However, it is not the role of the press to provide political leadership or to be advocates on this issue; rather that is the job of politicians and civil society organizations. Journalists should push themselves beyond the breaking news reporting system to report on climate change as a process with a past, a present and a future projection. It is for politicians to act on that reporting and to provide policy leadership and innovation.

Because investigative reporting is time- and resource-consuming, news organizations should make an ethical and a financial commitment to investigative reporting on climate change. We understand that making such a financial commitment is a challenge, as only a handful of news organizations can afford to devote the resources to support a reporter specialized in this complex but vital topic. But we should make a fundamental change from the current situation, where too few news organizations have reporters who understand science or how it works. Too few reporters can examine the subject with sophistication, much less explain it well to readers. Currently, even the best climate change coverage relies too much on reports in peer-reviewed scientific journals, in which the complexity of the research is often beyond the capacity of reporters to understand or to convey to the lay reader. As a result, newspaper reports are necessarily much shorter and couched in simpler language than the scientific studies they are based on. Important nuances are lost in the translation, and stories are deficient in essential context. Adequate context also requires column inches, and explaining complexity is the unique attribute of print journalism. The short story--or worse, the news brief—is the enemy of understanding complex science and policy issues. Editors need to recognize that space needs to be devoted to the stories written by these specialists.

Any action plan for news organizations should include improved training for reporters so that the media become the trusted and principal source of information on climate change. News organizations should learn to report independently on environmental change. “Independent” means news organizations should develop substantive expertise among their reporting staff, so that reporters can more critically assess the information they receive from their sources. Substantive expertise can come through hiring reporters with strong academic backgrounds in physical sciences, or through continuing professional education for current reporters.

Wherever possible, news organizations should avail themselves of expert resources at local universities, if not for training purposes, then of course for sourcing.

Senior editors need to understand the importance of the climate change story and encourage their reporters to tell it in innovative ways. In many news organizations, reporters with environmental stories face editors who see no great public interest in the

subject unless it has some obvious human conflict as its narrative. In the United States, for example, environmental stories are often placed as business stories because editors are familiar with and comfortable with business as a forum for story telling. While that may often be appropriate, it limits reporting on environmental change to matters of economics and policy, and rarely emphasizes scientific matters.

## **Sourcing Issues**

Journalists should focus on and improve their relationship with scientific experts on environmental change. Thus far, reporting on this subject has been dominated by politicians and by 'experts' both in industry and in the environmental movement, many of whom have obvious or identifiable conflicts of interest. Those parties have set the agenda for public discussion, and the news media have largely followed that agenda.

Journalists who become substantively expert in reporting on the environment should be encouraged to develop their expertise further and to apply it in choosing stories and sources. Most important, journalists who are substantive experts in environmental change should not be considered unobjective or biased when they use that expertise to guide their reporting. An objective reporter is not neutral with respect to truth and accuracy.

Journalists should not rely on a single source or "expert" in reporting on scientific issues related to climate change. Further, journalists should corroborate what they learn from all sources. Is there general scientific agreement on what an expert says, or does the source provide a view contrary to scientific consensus? If so, is that dissenting view considered a scientifically credible one?

Journalists should identify possible conflicts of interest in their sources. Journalists should be aware of (and strongly resist) lobby pressure that comes from politicians, corporations and advocacy groups. Journalists should not assume, for example, that an organization with a "green" name is impartial, authoritative or even credible. Checking sources is difficult but absolutely critical, as media credibility is at stake. Civil society groups and university-based research scientists, for example, can be expert and appropriate sources, but both are apt to depend for their research on outside funding, often from governments, corporations, international NGOs or wealthy individuals. What is the source of that funding? The public has a right to know.

## **Access to Information**

The international media should put pressure on science and research institutions to provide an electronic data bank of scientific data for professional and public use, so that journalists and news organizations that are willing to develop expertise for reporting on climate change could enhance their own material and their links to other existing data banks.

Journalists should promote their own informal networks of information about climate change, thus providing a forum for exchanging ideas, sources, and reporting expertise. For example, the Society of Environmental Journalists ([www.sej.org](http://www.sej.org)) in the United States

provides searchable archives of story ideas, articles, updates, events and other information with a focus on freedom of information issues of concern to environmental journalists in both the United States and Canada. It also publishes guidebooks for journalists on issues from environmental risk assessment to environmental toxins. SEJ also publishes scientific information on climate change specifically for journalists (<http://www.sej.org/resource/index18.htm>). Such an effort needs to be internationalized to take into account the unique circumstances of other parts of the world, including the developing world. At the intergovernmental level, the International Energy Agency provides research on energy and the environment to 28 member countries, most in Europe. ([www.iea.org](http://www.iea.org)). The United Nations Environment Programme ([www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org)) provides some resources for journalists, but mostly on policy matters, not scientific ones. There is currently no existing international network of journalists reporting on climate change.

As part of any international organizing effort, journalists in developed countries should find ways to share their reporting expertise and resources with journalists in developing countries. Reporters in the developed and developing worlds, in the north and the south, have different but related stories to tell about climate change.

In support of the foregoing recommendations, journalists everywhere should advocate for strong public records law that provide broad rights of access to government and official information. Where information access laws exist, journalists should use them vigorously and creatively to ensure their continued vitality.

Governments have an obligation to create conditions in which journalists can carry out critical environmental reporting without fear of harassment and violence. Many governments, particularly in the developing world, have taken action to restrict criticism by the media about government deficiencies in combating environmental degradation or to discourage media reports about the dangers of climate change. Governments should facilitate access to information on environmental issues; should encourage critical reporting on environmental policy and performance; and should aggressively investigate and prosecute individuals who use violence or intimidation to restrict such reporting.

Precisely because of uncertainty about the linkages between specific climatic events and global warming, it is vitally important that we have free and unfettered reporting from the front lines of global warming. Scientists for the most part agree that stronger and more frequent hurricanes, desertification, drought, famine, and disease outbreaks could all be linked to global warming.

## **Climate Change and Media Audiences**

Journalists should find innovative ways to explain environmental change to their local and regional audiences, using all the tools at their disposal: print, video, radio, photography, graphic design, and of course the Internet. Climate change is hard to tell in traditional journalistic forms, in particular as a narrative or as a video story, but there are more storytelling tools than ever, and journalists should learn to use them creatively. Readers, listeners, television viewers are increasingly interested in the subject, and news organizations are more likely to engage that interest when audiences understand the many interdisciplinary aspects of climate change and the consequences it has for their lives.

Radio journalists can be an especially effective source of information on climate change because terrestrial radio stories are relatively inexpensive to produce and broadcast. Particularly in the developing world, radio is a more ubiquitous medium than television or print, and it is available to those who cannot afford television or who are illiterate.

In developed countries, news organizations with limited resources should remember that their own audiences can be valuable sources of information, including video and audio, which they can submit through Internet portals. Crowd-sourcing, for example, in which a news organization asks its readers, listeners or viewers to submit information they have on a particular subject, can produce stories that reporters themselves cannot get, including expert analysis of complex subjects. Award-winning works of investigative journalism have already been done using crowd-sourcing.

In the same way journalists report other aspects of globalization issues in local terms – for example, how immigration affects a neighborhood economy in Paris, or how a liquidity crisis in New York affects a farmer in Bangladesh – journalists should explain global climate change in “localized” terms that resonate with their audiences. For example, explain to farmers in the American Midwest or to factory workers in a British industrial port city how climate change or global warming is going to affect them in their lifestyles, work and play, and they will read all about it.

Journalists should avoid “preaching” about climate change to their audiences, but instead emphasize skeptical, evidence-based reporting. That reporting should emphasize constructive economic and social responses to global warming and environmental change. Stories should not merely emphasize the potential “catastrophic” character of climate change. Scaring the public with sensationalized stories will turn off audiences, damage media credibility, and make worse the very problems we are trying to address. Making a story “concrete” by giving audiences facts and figures allows people to put the issue on the agenda of their own civil society groups. That process, in turn, supports stronger coverage of global climate change.

News organizations should not confuse stories about weather or natural disasters with stories about climate change. These things may be related, but they are not the same. The relationship between them, if any, should be explained carefully and prudently. Reports should not exaggerate or make unsupported implications.