

Briefing for journalists:

How should media talk about climate change

THERE IS NO
PLANET B



How should media talk about **climate change**



Why should the media care about how to talk about climate change

As the Norwegian psychologist and politician Per Espen Stoknes writes in his book *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming*, stories have a critical role in making climate change seem personally relevant and less overwhelming¹. Therefore, journalists as professional storytellers can influence how climate change or environmental issues are perceived by millions of citizens around the globe.

According to best practice, media should inform the audience about the global as well as local environmental and climate-related processes affecting human lives on a daily basis. Alongside the responsibility, the media holds the power to make people aware of the urgency of shifting human behavior to mitigate climate change. Moreover, the media can empower citizens to ask decision-makers informed and important questions, holding power to account. “The effectiveness of climate change mitigation is linked to public understanding of climate change issues, which people gain through daily media consumption, concludes scholar Kristen Alley Swain”.² By covering climate change with sufficient regularity and quality the media “can save lives, formulate plans, change policy, and empower people to make informed choices” at the local level.

According to UNESCO, in the context of climate change, media has three traditional roles – acting as watchdogs, campaigning on social issues, and more importantly, informing audiences. Informing the audience refers not only to delivering facts from stakeholders to citizens, but also to put an effort into how the message gets across - making it relevant, and selecting appropriate framings, so as to interest and engage the audience.

What is the problem?

“Climate change must be one of the hardest topics to talk about, surpassing sex and drugs and religion, on a par with topics such as death and depression” notes Rebecca Huntley in her book *How to Talk About Climate Change*.³ There are two main reasons for that:

¹ Stoknes, P. E., & Randers, J. (2015). *What we think about (when we try not to think about) global warming: Toward a new psychology of climate action*. Chelsea Green Publishing Co.

² Swain, K.A. (2015). Mass Media Roles in Climate Change Mitigation. In: Chen, WY., Suzuki, T., Lackner, M. (eds) *Handbook of Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation*. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6431-0_6-2

³ *How to Talk About Climate Change in a Way That Makes a Difference*, Rebecca Huntley

- Climate change is often discussed with doomsday interpretations. Due to the fear of extinction of human life, and tangible modifications in our surroundings, noticeable visually or via sensory perceptions, it is easy for journalists to fall into the trap of alarmism while talking about the climate crisis. Such alarmism is typically gaining more publicity by shocking the audience and spreads the climate anxiety, which refers to “a sense of fear, worry or tension linked to climate change”.⁴
- Climate change is not a neutral topic, on which everyone agrees. Despite the fact that there is overwhelming scientific evidence about the negative impact of climate change on human life and our own role in it,⁵ there are genuine differences of opinion on how seriously it should be tackled compared with other issues, and what the best routes to tackling it are. Another crucial factor is that various political and ideological groups are using the topic diligently to divide society, deepen political polarization and create false political agendas around it, using misinformation on science, economics, public opinion, and other topics. In this light, the role of media in communicating science-based facts about a global process affecting basically the entire population on the earth is even more critical.

There is a common belief that the Georgian audience is rather uninterested in climate change and its consequences due to many daily struggles in a politically or economically distorted reality. Nevertheless, according to a recent study within the project commissioned by the EU and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, almost 60% of Georgians identify climate change as one of the most important global challenges.⁶ Additionally, 91% see climate change as a real threat to humanity.⁷ Hence, society is much more concerned about climate-related changes than the urban legends tell. Moreover, according to the same study, 64.70% of Georgians believe that their behavior/lifestyle “can contribute towards neutralizing dangers caused by climate change.”⁸

WHAT SHOULD THE MEDIA DO?

1 | Talk!



We, journalists, can improve our reporting of climate change and environmental issues by ensuring consistency in frequency and the approach to the topic. The audience should have an expectation that if they want to hear more about climate change there is always the possibility to get information via our media platform. There is a huge opportunity to report proactively (!) environmental and climate stories, instead of waiting for another forest fire to break out or another glacier to shrink. Report about policies, trends, and important scientific findings including progress achieved within different societies, not only just natural disasters and human lives lost due to such cataclysms caused by the climate emergency.

⁴ What is 'Climate Anxiety', and what can you do about it? Mental Health UK
<https://mentalhealth-uk.org/blog/what-is-climate-anxiety-and-what-can-you-do-about-it/>

⁵ Scientific Consensus: Earth's Climate Is Warming - <https://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus/>

⁶ What Georgians know about climate change. 2020
<https://www.undp.org/georgia/publications/what-georgians-know-about-climate-change-2020>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

2 | Apply a climate lens to your stories!



Not every connection between news stories and the climate lies on the surface. Practicing good journalism implies finding such connections and informing the public about it. For example: if the government launches a plan to develop agriculture in Georgia: does that plan take climate change into consideration? What about if one major on-going story is the high cost of petrol, why not look at the economics of electric cars? How are currently high food prices affected by climate-change-linked poor harvests in other parts of the world? Or while covering international stories, if Russia funded its invasion of Ukraine with fossil fuel income, are petrostates more aggressive than others? (Answer: yes!) Good journalism often involves finding a good question to ask and making connections between processes and their consequences where it is relevant or necessary.

3 | Language matters!



Talking about climate change is challenging also due to the language around it and terminology that is sometimes too technical or too scientific for a lay audience. It is a core skill of journalists in every subject to translate difficult messages into more digestible information and bring more clarity to difficult topics; and this starts with reporters, editors, photographers, and managers becoming familiar with climate-related and environmental topics and terminology. It is impossible to know everything (yes, even for journalists!). Luckily, there is a growing number of resources available to journalists (see the list here) that helps us figure out terminology, procedures, or the scientific value of the current studies.

Due to the rigidity of Georgian scientific language, certain terms can be difficult to handle, though the art of journalism also allows us to make comparisons, simplifications, and interpretations (though not on the premise of factuality). Besides, there are public institutions, NGOs, grassroot activists and individual experts (see the list here) that can help us doing our job better.

Know your audience and talk to them the way you would want to be talked to if you were not a reporter who has already studied the topic. The whole point of being a journalist is not to just report but to inform. Informing the audience is only possible if they can follow what you are saying.

4 | Be scientific, yet approachable!



The best weapon against ideologically, politically, or financially motivated actors trying to convince the audiences that climate change is not a threat, is science! As mentioned above, our thrill to report and tell stories in an interesting way should not be a motif to compromise the factuality of our narratives. In order to keep the factual quality of our stories, it is crucial to stay based in science - and, where it's appropriate, in other types of evidence such as economics. Being scientific does not necessarily mean talking or writing like a scientist (Check the section above).

5 | Avoid doomsday interpretations!



As the researcher Kristen Alley Swain writes, alarmism is one of “the most common media frames in climate change coverage, but these narratives can be confusing, contradictory, and disempower the public.”⁹ By alarmism, we mean reporting climate-related stories as doomsday scenarios where everything and everyone is in danger and there is no way of reversing the damage caused by human activity on the planet.

⁹ Swain, K.A. (2015). Mass Media Roles in Climate Change Mitigation. In: Chen, WY., Suzuki, T., Lackner, M. (eds) Handbook of Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation. Springer, New York, NY. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-6431-0_6-2

Although science shows us that the situation is serious, particularly for communities and countries most routinely affected by impacts, it also shows there are ways to manage impacts and curb emissions. The problem with alarmism is that portraying climate-related occurrences as a doomsday scenario “excludes the possibility of real action or agency by the reader or viewer. It contains an implicit counsel of despair – ‘the problem is just too big for us to take on’.”¹⁰ Though importantly, avoiding alarmism in our reporting does not mean diminishing the urgency of showing people the benefits of taking action against the climate crisis.

6 | Emphasize local issues and implications!



Global problems have local consequences! Climate change is not a problem only in some abstract scientific dimension. It has implications for our districts, villages, and towns, in terms of (for example) hazards like fires, agriculture or extreme weather. People find it easier to relate to stories when global problems, trends, and achievements are translated into the local context. It is difficult (if not impossible) to sensitize citizens about deforestation in Amazon if they have not received scientific, well-researched, sound information about the causes or the consequences of forest fires in Borjomi-Kharagauli National park happening every second year. People might find it difficult to perceive the problematic nature of desertification in the Gobi desert, while they have not received proper information about a drought that dramatically affected vineyards in the Kakheti region.

7 | Show, not just tell!



It matters not only how we talk about climate change and environment-related issues, but also what we show and how we illustrate the problems we want to communicate to the audience. Images “are a key part of the communication process, shaping peoples’ attitudes and policy preferences on climate change.”¹¹ Imagery is a powerful medium, and realizing the full potential of the medium helps us focus on what is important in the story instead of manipulating the emotions of the audience. Falling for the trap of alarmism, discussed above, can happen easily by showing shocking images and footage. Despite the appeal of using dramatic visual material, the research shows that selecting relevant imagery for the story helps the viewer to relate to the story easier and stronger.¹² Instead of using generic images or video footage to illustrate the specific problem within the specific community, it is advised to show evidence or faces of people that the audience can relate to.



¹⁰ Warm Words: How are we telling the climate story and can we tell it better?

<https://www.ippr.org/publications/warm-wordshow-are-we-telling-the-climate-story-and-can-we-tell-it-better>

¹¹ O’Neill, S. More than meets the eye: a longitudinal analysis of climate change imagery in the printmedia. *Climatic Change* 163, 9–26 (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02504-8>

¹² Lehman, B., Thompson, J., Davis, S., & Carlson, J. M. (2019). Affective images of Climate Change. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00960>