

Reporting for change



Ten years ago, says Vlady Russo, more than 9 000 journalists covered the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Most of the articles and news broadcast from Rio de Janeiro were purely dry facts on events, workshops and meetings. Most of the time, actions to address environmental issues were reported based on the inverted pyramid paradigm; no reflection, engagement or critical thinking were evident in the majority of the 'environmental' news accounts.

At that time, environmental journalism, was a narrow area of reporting with a focus on ecology, scientific issues and natural disasters. The issue of objectivity was important and journalists were afraid of voicing their concerns and emotions.

Environmental reporting becomes clearer when people understand the broader concept of environment as including social, economic, political and biophysical issues. Due to its very nature, I believe environmental reporting should use a wider frame rather than a specific frame or beat (eg social or environmental).

This can be done when reporting on an event, an environmental risk or issue, a community concern, a political decision, a

“It is important to consider communities and the public as our partners for action and change rather than target audiences that need to be filled with information in order to change their attitudes and behaviours.”

developmental process or a natural disaster. The problems begin when journalists do not have enough background on the issues being reported; they have to rely on the same sources, often governmental institutions, NGOs or ‘experts’ on the subject. It is simply easier to report facts based on other people’s opinions and views.

Environmental reporting also covers issues such as ecotourism, sustainable development, genetically modified organisms, indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, etc. These are issues that require some in-depth understanding, if not a sound knowledge of the issues, and a working knowledge of their interrelationship with the broader environment.

Based on my experience, I believe that to report on these kinds of issues in a meaningful and appropriate way to promote change (through action-taking), one needs to have some understanding of them as well as of good sources to rely on. I would describe sources as not only the experts and government officials but mainly the people affected by the problems (as vital key players in shaping stories and providing their perspectives for the news). This means journalists should also be seen as part of the problem and solution.

In order to not only see environmental issues as scientific and complex, journalists should undergo training and be exposed to different ways of reporting environmental news around the world. This will not only provide challenging ideas on how to report meaningfully with a view to promote change and action, but also to enable them to seek relevant and contextualised environmental information.

Seeking environmental context

When seeking environmental information for context and understanding, it is important to consider the role of ‘common’ people and key players. However, there is a need to also consider the way the media disseminates and shares that information.

The approach I use is based on the assumption that by gaining a broader understanding of environmental issues through a consultative process involving different sources of information, a clearer picture will emerge. These sources include people (affected and being affected by the issue), places and publications. I believe that to enhance environmental reporting, journalists need to broaden their perspectives by obtaining as much information as they can, but also considering time limitations, editors’ priorities and lack of resources.

It is important to consider communities and the public as our partners for action and change rather than target audiences that need to be filled with information in order to change their attitudes and behaviours. This can be done by involving a wider number of community members when obtaining information and recognising that we should ‘do’ the first step, after all, journalists are also part of communities.

Stimulating debate and questioning

Action for change can be encouraged if there is a component of debate and questioning among the public. This is achieved by involving the community in an engaged and interactive debate and by reporting on issues relevant to local rather than global issues within the context of the society where we live. By giving voice to people affected by the problems, without patronising them or promoting a guilty sentiment for those provoking the problem, it is possible to initiate critical debate leading to action for change. This makes environmental reporting flexible and responsive to people’s concerns.

Action for change takes place based on real problems affecting real people and the environment. This is especially relevant for environmental reporting and has a significant influence in the stimulation of engaged debate.

Some of the key points emerging in this “new way” of reporting environmental issues, a focus on action and change, are: the involvement of journalists in stories and interaction with partner groups, the use of balanced and controversial viewpoints, application of interactive media techniques and a combination of different approaches to journalism, and reporting as objectively as possible while considering subjective factors.

Supporting action-taking

For the mainstream media to support and cover action-taking activities there is an economic need for sensationalism, a social predisposition to report disaster and a political component to opposition to the government. Bad news sells much better; this is the economic gymnastics the media has to consider when reporting news. When this reporting is only based on criticism and sensationalism but doesn’t provide critical analysis of the issue, it can limit the understanding of the root causes of the problems and provoke emotional reactions from civil society. Action-taking activities are successful if the support given by the media is based on a spirit of sharing ideas through co-operation rather than simply reporting dry facts and alarming news. According to Addison (1993) this approach can stimulate free debate on environmental problems and call for action and collaboration between the community and the media.

Another essential that needs to be recognised by the media while supporting action for change is the use of critical communication techniques and socially critical approaches. Again, encouraging critical questioning and a critical analysis of the news can lead civil society to make meaning of ‘what they already know’, and seek solutions for socio-environmental problems. A two-way communication process is important to achieve this, particularly within the context of a population which normally takes part in activities if their interests are at risk.

Civil society needs to be seen by the media not just as

Vlady Russo is an Angolan working for the SADC Regional Environmental Education Programme in South Africa. For the past six years he has been supporting environmental reporting in Angola through the Ecological Youth of Angola. His career as an environmental journalist started in 1996 when he started the first environmental radio programme in Angola “Green Phone.” He has been involved in the establishment of radio programmes, presented slots on environmental issues for Angolan television and has been published in Angolan regional newsletters. He is the editor of the bulletin of the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA) and of the EEmail – the newsletter for the SADC Regional Environmental Education Programme.



mere spectators powerless to respond to issues who are indoctrinated with information that sells. Society is in constant change and its members need to become partners and actors who can interpret the news, understand the situation and take action to solve problems.

An uphill battle

Environmental reporting, as in any other area of journalism, is limited by a number of political, social and economic issues. These include political control of the state media, economic pressures on the private media and cultural and social differences within the society. To make the situation more complex there are also technical and ideological issues such as free access to sources of information, objectivity versus subjectivity and sensitivity to biased reporting. These factors put enormous pressure on environmental journalists and can only be overcome with growing experience and strong support from media institutions.

However, these limitations do not take from the media the crucial role it plays in reporting environmental issues by ensuring the community actively participates in change by questioning and debate, action-taking activities and information seeking.

There is no single 'recipe' or 'model' for reporting environmental issues in a way that promotes action for change without compromising a number of stakeholders. Win-win situations are only possible if a combination of approaches and orientations to environmental reporting are used, based on dialogue within the society and collaborative reflection by members of civil society.

According to Archibald (1999) environmental reporting needs to be able to provide clear information so people understand environmental issues and are able to make informed decisions leading to action. To achieve this, more training, space and time should be given to environmental journalists. Recognition that journalists also face environmental risks and are likely to be subjective when affected or advocating a cause needs to be taken into consideration.

The concept of being objective when reporting should not be over-emphasised every time news is reported. It is commonly argued that objectivity is a way of reducing the impact of journalists' opinions, emotions and other subjective feelings. For example, according to Morris (1996), objectivity is the journalist's commitment

to balance, fairness and independence of views in their reporting. This might give the impression that journalists avoid their civic responsibility to address a problem, transforming them into 'cold' people who seem unaffected by environmental issues.

To avoid this kind of 'manipulation' of the news, I suggest an approach based on a balance of objective reporting, recognising it is often impossible to factor out subjective forces such as social values and knowledge, ideologies and personal principles.

To Killingsworth and Palmer (cited by Hannigan 1999) reporting using an objective and balanced approach means that journalists "...often attempt to distance themselves and their readers from the environmentalist struggle... taking refuge instead in the objectivism of science". Therefore, writes Hannigan (*ibid.*), journalists seem to express "...themselves as a neutral and ironic voice... that... rarely express the content of environmental stories in overtly political terms, opting instead for news frames which emphasise conservation, civic responsibility and consumerism".

For the benefit of all, including the journalist, it is important to report environmental issues in a way that shows an advocacy role and "...willingness to get involved in the debate by bringing new facts and new interpretations to bear on arguments" (Fairley 1997).

Fairley argues that biased reporting is unlikely to earn readership because it is clearly unsupported by facts which can compromise the role of the media in promoting action for change. On the other hand, advocating a cause or flagging a position, without being extremist and radical, can bring about understanding, dialogue and action. Journalists can advocate action for change if they are able to produce balanced news and catalyse educational and social change processes within their communities.

Looking to the future

The role of environmental reporting in supporting environmental learning and action for change is being undermined by the fact that it is neither seen as a priority nor as an important specialised area of journalism. Nonetheless, environmental journalism is still an area in constant change and adaptation due to lack of freedom of the press, the narrow perception of the environment and high competition among media companies. Lack of

resources and funds to support capacity building and training are also some of the constraints of environmental reporting.

Another issue of concern is still the debate over objectivity and subjectivity in reporting which seems to dominate most of the discussions on the 'paradigm' for journalism. Rather than spending time in this endless debate, the media should look at issues of accuracy of information dissemination through reporting facts without bias towards specific interest groups and by involving different partners.

In order to support environmental learning and to promote action for change, members of the civil society should be seen as, and act as, a partner (be actively involved and engaged) in the process of 'making' news and not as the 'target' (a passive recipient who receives instructions).

To promote action for change, environmental reporting cannot be purely objective, but rather must use an approach which attempts to report objectively but which recognises subjective factors such as societal values and knowledge, ideologies and personal principles. Journalists should be 'in the picture' and see themselves 'in the mirror' because they are part of society. And, rather than seeing the old inverted pyramid (what, who, when, where, why) as the recipe, journalists should use it as a guiding framework with useful questions to obtain relevant information. Relevant to whom? That's another challenge.

References

- Addison, G. 1993. The watchdog role of development journalists. South Africa.
- Archibald, E. 1999. Problems with environmental reporting: perspectives of daily newspaper reporters. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, Volume 30, N° 4.
- Fairley, P. 1997. Advocacy. Saving the baby in the bathwater. *Society of Environmental Journalists Journal*, Vol. 7, N° 1, Winter 1996-1997. Society of Environmental Journalists, Philadelphia.
- Hannigan, J. 1999. *Environmental Sociology*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Morris, M. 1996. "That hoary O word" *Rhodes Journalism Review*, Number 12, October 1996. Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Rhodes University, Grahamstown.

