

Journalism 101:

The principles of journalism



Media ownership, news values,
framing, and storytelling



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News Decoder



TEHRA
The Environment and Human Rights Academy

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The Empowering Youth through Environmental Storytelling is a collaboration between The Environment and Human Rights Academy (TEHRA), News Decoder and the Young Educators European Association (YEEA).

The purpose of these educational materials is to help young people understand the climate crisis on a systems level through engaging with the topics and foster agency through the skills and techniques of journalism.

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We cannot be held liable for how these materials are used in practice.

These educational resources have been developed to the best of our knowledge, using reliable and widely-recognized sources. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy and clarity, we cannot guarantee that the materials are free from errors or omissions. Climate change is a field of knowledge that continues to evolve, and teachers and learners are encouraged to consult up-to-date scientific sources (e.g. IPCC, IPBES or national agencies) to complement and enrich these activities.

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1. The role of media and journalism in society

In many societies today, we are bombarded with information.

Information comes from news sites, your friends, entertainment platforms, and companies – through articles, messages, images, videos, ads and graphics – and it can be difficult to know or even think about where the information is coming from.

Whether you realize it or not, this tsunami of information affects you: It shapes what you know about events, how you see the world and how you feel about people, issues and products.

In order to further understand climate change and how it affects communities all over the world, it is helpful to understand how the media functions, what journalists do, and how you can communicate about the climate crisis yourself.



The media can — and, ideally, should — perform a variety of critical functions in any society. It should:

- Keep the public informed of current events and issues
- Foster informed debate and discussion on matters of public importance
- Hold powerful governmental and private actors to account

In reality, the media sector often fails to perform these “good governance” functions for reasons both internal and external to media organizations.





The building blocks of a robust media sector

For the media sector to operate as an institution of accountable governance, it is critical for foundational “building blocks” to be in place.

1. **Infrastructure:** Everything from transmission towers and cables, to printing plants and newspaper distributors, to cell phone ownership.
2. **Professional Skills and Editorial Independence:** A country must have a critical mass of journalism professionals who are trained to gather, produce and publish information according to ethical standards, and who are protected by law and policies from interference by governmental or business actors.
3. **Financial Sustainability:** Media organizations must have financially-sustainable business models that enable them to employ journalism professionals and fund the gathering, production and dissemination of news content.
4. **Policy and Regulatory Environment:** A country's legal and policy framework must facilitate the gathering and disclosure of information, uphold editorial independence and protect journalists and their sources.
5. **Civil Society and the Public:** A robust media also relies on a media literate public, journalists' unions to protect journalists, and media watchdogs.

Resources for evaluating a country's media sector

Many countries around the world lack some or all of the core building blocks of a robust media sector.

Consequently, the media content available in these countries is often poor, and the media fails to perform its good governance functions.

You can evaluate the state of the media sector in different countries by referring to a variety of online resources, including the [Reuters Digital News Reports](#).





2. Media ownership

Media content is produced by people, and not only the individuals named under a headline.

Typically, a host of people play a role in determining what stories get covered and how the final product turns out. These include:

- **Publishers:** The term “publisher” is used to refer both to the person who owns a media organization as well as the organization that publishes all of the media content under a specific media name or brand.
- **Editors:** Senior editors determine what stories to cover and assign journalists to conduct reporting and produce content. Junior editors actively shape individual news stories by working with reporters to ensure a story is compelling and satisfies the organization's editorial standards.
- **Reporters:** Reporters conduct research and reporting, produce drafts of their content and work with the editors, fact-checkers and copy editors to see their stories through to publication.
- **Fact-checkers:** Fact-checkers ensure that all of the statements made in a story are factually and contextually accurate. For budgetary reasons, many media organizations no longer employ fact-checkers, which increases the responsibility on reporters and editors to ensure stories are accurate.
- **Copy editors:** Copy editors prepare content for publication, with a particular focus on ensuring clarity, consistency of terms and grammatical correctness.
- **Production experts:** A host of technicians and producers assist with the dissemination of media content online, on air or in print. These individuals typically do not materially change content once it has been finalized by the editorial team.

The average media consumer may have never heard of the publisher — that is, the person who owns the media organization that publishes the content they consume. Yet, the publisher can exert enormous influence over media production by setting editorial values and standards and controlling the organization's purse strings.

Task: Using Google, can you find out who the major news publishers are in your country? Can you then go to each of those sites and find out who owns them? Is it a family, a private organisation, or the government? What can you find out about them?



Why media ownership matters

Can you think of some reasons why governments and families might have an interest in controlling the media?

The short answer is that owning media enables you to control the message. You can influence:

- *What* information is supplied;
- *How much information* is provided on any particular person, issue or topic; and
- *How* the information is presented.

In a perfect world, media outlets — both government and private — would fulfill the “good governance” functions discussed above: keeping the public informed, fostering debate and holding the powerful to account.

In practice, many media outlets fall short of this goal. The media owners who live up to this “gold standard” tend to put institutional safeguards in place to ensure that the media outlet’s editorial team is free to report on issues without restraint or fear of repercussion.





"Separation of church and state"

Historically, reputable media organizations have protected editorial independence by ensuring a strict "separation of church and state." This phrase is used in the media industry to refer to institutional policies and practices that ensure the employees responsible for the organization's business operations operate separately from the employees who produce its media content.

The separation of business and editorial functions helps ensure journalists are free to pursue important news stories, even if doing so risks uncovering information that hurts the media outlet's advertisements sales or attracts the wrath of powerful actors.

In recent years, even reputable media organizations have started to relax the strict church-state separation as a result of increasing financial pressures and evolving industry trends. However, media organizations concerned about ensuring editorial independence still take steps to ensure their journalists are insulated from the financial decision-making of their companies.

Task: What media outlets do you follow? What's their take on journalism? Do they tend to have a political swing one way or another? What topics do they tend to prioritise and how do they frame these topics?





3. The role of a journalist

A journalist can be seen as the eyes of the public. Given the time, skills, and tools needed, journalists go out into the world to ask questions, observe what is happening, and gather factual information to report it all to the public. The platform used to show what the journalist has discovered is a publication, which the public has access to either through a paid subscription or for free.

Different types of content produced by a journalist

Open a news site or watch the news on your computer or TV and you'll notice that not all the stories follow the same structure or format. Depending on the publication, there are many different types of stories.

- **News stories** inform the public about current events or issues, and are generally quite short. They report important facts and provide readers with the context to make sense of them. A reporter gathers information for a news story by doing research and conducting interviews.
- Like news stories, **investigative reports and feature stories** are based on interviews and research. What distinguishes them from news stories is their purpose, and often their length. Rather than simply informing the public about current events, investigative stories expose an issue — like corruption,

corporate wrongdoing, or systemic problems — that affects the public in some way, while feature stories go deeper into a topic and explore a new angle.

- **Opinion stories** are articles that are written from one person or group's perspective, so while they can be interesting and spark debate in a community, they do not include the "objectivity" that is central to regular journalism.
- **Reflective pieces or essays** are articles that combine research and reporting with the writer's own experience. Reflective pieces allow a writer to bring readers directly into their own world.





A note on advertising:

Native advertising is advertising that resembles in style, tone and format editorial content — that is, reported stories or opinion pieces.

By design, native advertising is difficult for readers to identify as advertorial content, since its purpose is to sell readers on an idea, product or service without readers realizing that there is a commercial agenda behind the message.

By making an ad seem like the newspaper's editorial content, readers are more likely to accept the ad's claims as reliable, accurate and objective. Many journalists prefer not to write native advertising due to its commercial agenda.

Think and discuss: How do content creators on social media blend advertising with their expertise or area of interest and information?





4. The principles and values of journalism

Now let's carry on with how you would go about telling these stories.

Good quality news and investigative stories are accurate, authoritative and balanced, and they help readers make sense of events. There are numerous signs you can watch for to assess whether a story is well-reported or not. Among the most important are: sources, quotes, context and fair comment.

- Quality news stories **use authoritative and clearly identified sources** that enable readers to have confidence in a story's accuracy.
- Quality news stories **use quotes to bring a story to life and give it balance**.
- Quality news stories **provide readers with enough context** to help them make sense of the event in question.
- If a story portrays a party in a negative way, it should be clear that that party was **provided with an opportunity to comment**.

Using sources and quotes and providing context and opportunity for comment allows a journalist to:

Using sources and quotes and providing context and opportunity for comment allows a journalist to:

1. *Tell the truth*

In climate stories the first truth is that **climate change is happening**.

Telling the truth, then, of what and whom climate change is impacting and why it is important means that a journalist must use facts, provide a source's quotes in context, and explain what the data is saying.

Fact: A truth that can be verified through objective evidence.

Authoritative data: Does the data come from a verifiable source? If it has limitations, the journalist should state them.

Sources: Do the sources have expertise or extensive knowledge or experience to answer the questions the journalist is asking?





2. Be fair

In any story produced by a journalist, there are stakeholders. Are the major stakeholders – the perpetrators and the victims – given a voice by the journalist?

Is the journalist holding stakeholders accountable for their actions?

Are the victims given the chance to articulate their experience and be honest? And is the context provided so that the audience can form an understanding of the stakeholders and their actions?

3. Serve the public

Does the journalist provide the reader with the information to be able to form an opinion – without being swayed by a journalist's bias – on the topic? Is the information easily understood and accessible?

Newsworthiness

But a story also needs to be newsworthy. That doesn't mean that it has to be about an event that happened today or yesterday, but it should fit with one or some of the following news values, which help determine the relevance and significance of a story to the audience.

Timeliness: An event or discovery that is recent or current. *"Bushfires rapidly tear across Australia's east coast."*

Proximity: The story is geographically or emotionally close to its audience. *"Soaring temperatures are causing problems for pregnant women in Keneba, Gambia."* or *"These high school students in Kenya are campaigning to increase climate change awareness."*

Impact: It is affecting or having a significant impact on policy, public opinion, individuals, or communities. *"By mid 2030 the number of daily flights globally could double"* or *"Denmark is introducing a carbon tax on farmers."*





Human interest: A story focuses on the emotional or personal aspects, evoking empathy, compassion, or curiosity.

"This Indigenous community is being forcibly pushed from their land amid persistent drought and soaring temperatures."

Conflict: Includes tension, controversy, or contrast. *"Climate hero or villain? Fossil fuel frenzy challenges Norway's green image."*

Novelty: This is a unique or original story, perhaps told in a different way or exploring an aspect of the story that not many have thought of. *"Climate change is affecting the sex of some lizards."*

Many stories often include more than one of the above news values – in fact, the more the better!



5. Framing, context, and narratives

Framing in communications and journalism is the way certain aspects of an issue are emphasized so that it is understood in a particular way. In terms of climate change, the framing of any given story is not what is being told but rather how it is being told. It is how the issue is made sense of.

While a journalist should of course provide facts and accurate data, the way a journalist decides to tell a story – who to interview, what data to include, what aspect of the story to focus on – shapes how the audience understands it.

In the media, we see climate change framed as a disaster. This frame can lead us to feel hopeless and scared.

We see the solutions to the climate crisis being framed often using the word "green" – "green cities" and "green lifestyle choices". This framing leads us to believe that we can help to address climate change by changing our individual lifestyles. Other times, ambitious solutions are framed as "too expensive" or "utopian". This framing leads us to believe that transformative action is simply out of reach.



How do you think the climate crisis should be framed? In the previous module on journalism we talked about storytelling being the context, and how this forms a quilt of understanding. Framing is much the same as storytelling – what story do we want to tell about our world and therefore how should the media be framing the topic of climate change?

The context needed in a climate change story

When you read an article or watch a video about climate change in your country or somewhere else around the world, does the journalist state the particular country's needs to reduce emissions and to do so through political and legal change? Does the journalist state which communities are most affected by climate change?

It is important, when telling the stories about the climate crisis, to include the information that states what ultimately needs to be done or has led to the problem – usually to cut CO₂ emissions or to change an approach to the economy or the land on which we live.

And does the journalist provide the context needed to understand who affects or is affected by the issue – that some countries, companies and groups more than others are contributing to the climate crisis or that some countries and communities are being impacted more than others?

A journalist must provide context, as the context paints the picture.





The importance of people

The most interesting stories are specific. They focus on a person, a place, or a community. Remember the news values – a lot of them center around impact and proximity to a certain group or place.



However, you also want to make your story interesting to people living on the other side of the world. And this is easily done when it comes to climate stories. It is done by providing the context to show that this isn't just an issue that's being experienced by the country or people you're talking to, because climate change is an issue that in some way or another affects everyone.

It is in the art of showing, not telling. By showing why the issue is an issue of climate change, of inequality, and maybe of a direction forward, this shows audiences everywhere that this topic is relevant.



6. The importance of storytelling

The crisis of inequality has been made worse by the climate crisis.

Good climate journalism reveals the injustices and the solutions through storytelling. Yes, journalism tells the truth and explains the events, but it is also telling a story. Not a fictional story, but rather the story of our reality.

Storytelling is the way that journalists, through their stories, convey complex information in a manner that is relatable and accessible to its audience.

And it is the quilt of these stories, sewn by the audience's understanding, that forms the blanket of our reality. Like any good quilt, it includes the light and the dark, the detail and the bigger picture, the patterns, and the contrast.

Storytelling is the context that gives a journalistic product meaning and purpose.



If a journalist shines a light on a problem, the storytelling is the way forward, a way of tackling the problem.

If a journalist presents a solution, the storytelling explores who the solution is benefitting, whether all have equal access to it, and whether there are limitations.

If a journalist reports on an event, it is the storytelling that explains who is behind it, why it is important, and who is affected.

A climate story worth telling

A climate story worth telling is therefore about:

- *Solutions* to our climate problems;
- *Those being affected* by the problems;
- The *people* finding these solutions;
- And *what* they are doing and *why*.

See the below examples of what we think is good climate journalism. Remember that not all journalism is writing. If you better express yourself in images or with sound, then you can find your own way to tell the story.



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Students can either view the below examples as homework, or one or two of each can be shown in class.

Written:

NZ Funding Helps Indigenous Farmers in Indonesia Protect Forests Boost Incomes, Mongabay

Wood Vaulting: A Simple Climate Solution You've Probably Never Heard Of, Grist

Inside a New Experiment to Find the Climate Proof Coffee of the Future, Grist

Growing Food on Arid Land, News Decoder

Can India be a Global Role Model for Climate Friendly Energy Growth, News Decoder

Videos:

Can we Stop the Deserts from Spreading? DW Planet A

Gardens of Resilience: How Gond Adivasi Women Are Cultivating Change Amid Crisis - India, GAGGA Alliance

How Singapore Fixed its Big Trash Problem, CNBC International

Podcasts:

How We Fix This
TED Climate