

Training community-based journalists for climate change reporting: lessons from South Africa

Brett Cohen, The Green House Consultants, University of Cape Town, brett@tgh.co.za

Leonie Joubert, leonie@leoniejoubert.co.za

Abstract: Reporting to the public on climate change impacts, adaptation, and mitigation requires journalists to be equipped to engage with a wide range of technical content in order to communicate it in an accessible and engaging way. Recognizing the need for journalists from a wide range of backgrounds, including those from community newspapers and radio stations in South Africa, to be able to undertake this task, the South African Department of Environment Affairs in partnership with GIZ commissioned the authors to develop and deliver a four-day climate change reporting training programme. This paper presents an overview of the structure and content of the course, and details the reflections after undertaking such an endeavor.

Based on the lessons learned, and an awareness that this kind of training may take place in the context where working community-level journalists may have a low knowledge base (of both the journalistic craft, as well as the content of climate science) the following recommendations emerge: scientific training may need to be combined with basic journalistic training (depending on the participants); learning-by-doing is central to journalists building their capacity in climate reporting training; and mother-tongue delivery of material is critical to the success of such technical training courses.

Keywords: Climate change, journalism, media, training, mitigation, impact, adaptation

Brett Cohen has an undergraduate and PhD degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Cape Town. He has worked on climate change and sustainability-related projects in both academia and the private sector for the last 15 years and is a Lead Author on the IPCC Assessment Report 6 (AR6).

Leonie Joubert is a specialist science journalist and author in the fields of climate change, energy policy issues, food security, invasive alien species, and environmental resource economics.

The role of journalists as communicators in society is three-fold: to serve as watchmen, as participants in decision making, and as teachers (Shramm, 1964). Community-based journalism, as with all forms of democratised journalism, is central to the functioning of a healthy democracy, and to supporting sustainable and appropriate development in the Global South. MacBride further maintains that a democratised media human rights and advances liberty and democracy (MacBride, 1980). Moore and Gillis argue that the “use of information to achieve greater participation of citizens... is essential to their growth, empowerment, and sustainability” and is necessary for national and community-level self-determination and self-improvement (Moore & Gillis, 2005).

Journalists are “servants to, or partners with, the people of the community” and to be effective in their role as communicators serving their constituents, they must reach into those constituencies, including those in rural areas (Moore & Gillis, 2005). This allows information exchange that can foster democratic participation, which can support community growth, empowerment, and sustainability. They are members of the communities in which they work, “gathering stories for the civic good...for the public good...for the community” (Moore & Gillis, 2005). Community-based journalists are embedded within their constituencies, which allows them to engage directly with their audiences to understand their needs and address these directly. Community journalists in South Africa are considered to understand their function as community educators, a role which goes beyond merely reporting on the news (Hatcher, 2013).

Climate change communication through the mainstream media is well established globally, with specialist journalists regularly reporting on the physical evidence, projections of climate change, its likely impacts, and associated mitigation and adaptation responses. Much has been published in the academic literature on the challenges of communication between scientists and the media, and on the important role the media has to play in the multiple challenges of addressing and responding to climate change (Bolsen & Shapiro, 2017 Moser, 2016; Olausson & Berglez, 2014).

In South Africa, media channels for dissemination of climate change related information include the public broadcaster, pay-for-view local and international channels, and mainstream print and online newspapers, which carry articles of local and international relevance. There is, however, limited evidence of climate change information being included in the print and broadcast content targeting rural communities in their own languages. Providing news content related to climate change in many languages for rural communities is important as the context of South Africa is one of diverse languages across rural communities. There are eleven official languages, and English is not understood by all (DBE, 2017).

In recognition of this gap, the Department of Environmental Affairs in South Africa, with support from the German development cooperation Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, launched a training course for print and radio journalists working in media targeting audiences in rural communities. This paper presents an overview of the structure and content of the course, along with sharing the trainers’ reflections and observations from having undertaken such an endeavor. The purpose of the paper is to

provide insights that could be used by others seeking to undertake similar initiatives related to training rural journalists to report on climate change in their communities.

Brief Overview of the Training Structure

Prior to the face-to face training, participants were issued a pre-course questionnaire to gauge their level of knowledge and English language skills so that the trainers could decide how to pitch the material. The training was conducted over four days in total— with the first set of two days unfolding in October 2018 and the second two days occurring in January 2019. Between these workshops the participants engaged in learning-by-doing writing exercises. The choice to split the four-day training was based on the understanding that working journalists would be unlikely to be able to leave their newsroom for longer periods.

The first two-day training session focused on the technical aspects of climate change and on climate change reporting. After the first training session, participants were required to write a news story or develop a radio clip of relevance to their own communities on the topic of climate change and its impacts on the communities. The purpose of this assignment was to give them “hands-on” experience. The course conveners provided two rounds of detailed written edits to assist them in their learning, in addition to offering telephonic support where requested.

The content and structure of the second two-day training session was guided by the experiences from the first session. Participants were required to publish or broadcast their story within two weeks of the second workshop. The majority of journalists did publish their materials, although it took up to six weeks for them to do so.

The course was designed and delivered by two trainers: an independent science writer with extensive experience in climate change reporting and training journalists in science writing, and a skilled technical expert on climate change mitigation with extensive training and facilitation skills. As the course developed, it was adapted in recognition of the significant language gaps between the trainers and participants. A first language Zulu speaking translator was thus also included in the training team. At the time she was a postgraduate student in geography and environmental science, and had a sound technical knowledge of climate change concepts.

Assessment of Prior Knowledge

With the exception of those participants currently working on climate change, the authors found that the journalists came from a low knowledge base on the topic. The pre-course questionnaire, along with one of the icebreaker exercises conducted during the October 2018 training, indicated that participants *thought* they understood climate change and some of its impacts. However, when interviewed, it became clear that they had little understanding of multiple aspects. For instance: they had misconceptions related to greenhouse gas emissions and their sources, they did not understand the difference between climate change and normal weather variances, they were unclear about the difference between greenhouse gases and

local air pollutants, and they had difficulty distinguishing between the environmental and health impacts of greenhouse gas emissions, ambient air pollution, or those related to solid waste dumping in communities. A deeper understanding of these key concepts would be beneficial for communication to the general public. Most participants, however, had heard of renewable energy.

A further consideration was the journalists' low level of understanding on how to interpret numerical information and data that are presented graphically, including infographics that are often produced by scientific bodies reporting on climate change for public consumption. Interrogating the climate literature for translation to a generalist audience requires some degree of numerical literacy.

Snapshot of the Workshops

Design of the first two-day workshop

The first two-day workshop was designed to give equal attention to the content of climate science and process of journalistic reporting, with the mornings largely dedicated to climate science, and the afternoons to writing and reporting skills. On the first day, the participants were introduced to climate change causes, impacts, and vulnerability. This element included identification of sources of greenhouse gas emissions, identification of the biggest emitters, and identification of relevant local impacts. The trainers attempted to highlight the distinction between local air pollutants, pollution impacts and greenhouse gas emissions/climate change, a distinction with which participants struggled.

In terms of writing and reporting skills, the trainers guided the participants through the process of identifying stories, briefed them on how to find local experts, sources, and literature, and taught them about how to read the climate literature. Lectures were interspersed with practical exercises, which served to help participants in understanding how they would connect the global issue of climate change with local journalistic-style stories. These exercises simulated the process of daily news production, specifically how to identify and pitch a story idea to an editor and how to conceptualise a research approach and writing.

This was a prompt for the journalists to identify their first story which they would then work on after the workshop, with the objective of having this published or broadcast through their newsroom. The potential sources of literature which journalists could access to gather information started to be highlighted across the first day, a topic that continued to be reinforced throughout the course. The material was interspersed with video clips that provided additional perspectives of how other newsrooms around the world have handled the topic of climate reporting.

On the second day, the climate science component focused on adaptation and mitigation from a local and international policy perspective. The journalistic content focused on understanding how science journalism is different from other journalistic beats, such as political, economic, or sports writing. Participants spent time interrogating the role of social media, of which many were familiar.

Both days started with icebreaker exercises aimed at getting participants to relax, feel comfortable in the group, and begin to communicate with each other. On the first day, a combination of lectures and discussion sessions were used. On reflection at the end of the first day, the trainers decided that participants needed to be more involved, work more in small groups, and not spend too much time sitting and listening. As such, the second day's programme was adjusted to take these considerations on board to ensure far more active participation, which was found to be effective.

Design of the Second Two-day Workshop

The programme for the second two-day workshop, which ran three months later, was to focus on knowledge gaps identified during the first workshop and in the practical story writing process that was assigned during the interim period. In spite of the fact that attendees were already working in newsrooms, the trainers noted relatively low news-production skills, which further complicated the efforts to support better reporting of a topic as scientifically complex as climate change. On this basis, the second workshop was designed to place greater emphasis on the basics of news story production, including styles of writing news content, how to structure news articles, etc. The enhanced focus on the basics of news story production meant that the second workshop had less attention to the climate science aspects than the previous workshop, which had given equal attention to each of these. The technical component focused primarily on revisiting and expanding on material from the first workshop, including:

- What is global warming and climate change?
- What do the various terms mean – climate science, impact, adaptation, vulnerability?
- What are greenhouse gases and where do they come from?
- What is the relationship between local air pollutants and greenhouse gases?
- How do air pollution or carbon emissions differ from the problem of solid waste pollution?

Additional content covered in the second workshop included issues related to measurement units, graphs, and infographics.

The first workshop revealed that participants had relatively little journalistic experience and lacked strong skills for generating reporting-style news. The trainers therefore adapted the second workshop to incorporate some of the basics of journalism and reporting processes. The story writing process was designed to take the participants through all aspects of writing a report or producing a news broadcast from beginning to end through a series of practical exercises. The content included identifying:

- An angle for the story;
- Audience;
- The desired outcomes from writing the story;
- Experts (including finding their contact details); and
- Reports that could be used for information.

As mentioned previously, a key change in the second workshop was the inclusion of an environmental and geographic scientist to serve as a translator. Specifically, the trainers had

identified the pressing need for climate information to be explained in Zulu, as this was one of the language groups most represented in the cohort. It was essential that translation services were provided by a trained scientist who was familiar with climate science, rather than an ordinary translator. Effective translation in the context of designing news related to climate change required more than just verbatim language translation. It was indispensable that the translator also have the ability to interpret and explain the science content.

Reflections

Progression of Journalists' Knowledge

The observations shared in this section are based largely in analysis of the stories submitted between the two workshops. Specifically, the trainers noticed that many of the journalists entered the course with limited knowledge of climate change science or the ability to interpret numerical information or data that is presented graphically. Many had low news-writing and broadcasting skills and needed a back-to-basics practical component to be offered in the workshops. From the first draft of the stories, these particular areas of confusion continued to present themselves. Specifically, participants struggled to differentiate between climate change and other environmental issues, such as local impacts of poor solid waste management, in addition to making distinctions between adaptation and impact. Furthermore, some of the journalists faced challenges with structuring their stories. Key struggles included: communicating a central message and engaging in original writing. In some cases, participants plagiarized text of articles that were previously published online by other local news titles. The feedback trainers offered on the first draft of participants' stories did appear to address some of these issues, although not in all cases.

By the end of the second workshop, some of these basic concerns were addressed. Many of the participants demonstrated a clearer understanding of both climate change and the journalistic process.

The improvement is attributed to three factors which the trainers identified through engaging with the participants during the training, as well as through analysing the responses to an online questionnaire which the participants completed anonymously at the close of the training. The quotes, below, are drawn from the anonymous feedback forms.

The first factor that contributed to the improvement is the participation in the process itself – both the previous workshop and the learning-by-doing story writing process. The second is that participants considered the inclusion of the translator to have significantly enhanced their understanding of the concepts. Some examples of feedback that demonstrates this point include:

“The translation really helped in terms of translating some of the science jargon into Zulu, it made it easier to understand.”

“I think the training was spot on, especially that there was a translator. It made our understanding easier.”

The third factor is the more extensive use of hands-on exercises to guide the learning process, and a return to the very basics of journalistic method. One participant commented:

“The activities, and groups work, because you get to hear how others see things, and you end up learning in that way.”

It remains to be seen whether the skills and experience gained will be retained by the journalists, and whether it is transferable to writing and reporting in other areas, including on other climate change related topics.

Observations and Recommendations

Key observations and recommendations are offered to support similar trainings in the future. These are drawn from the trainers’ analysis of the participants’ engagement during the training, the quality of the journalistic outputs resulting from the training, and the anonymous feedback forms. The quotes below are once again drawn from the feedback forms.

Firstly, the trainers considered the course duration to be appropriate for the desired outcomes – i.e. providing a basic overview of climate science and reporting. Should more in-depth knowledge be required, a further two days could be considered, or alternatively requiring production of one more story after the two days. Two separate participants commented:

“So far I have consumed enough and fair information that exceeded my expectations.”

“I think everything was covered and you answered all the questions we were curious about.”

Having said that, a small number of participants disagreed and expressed a desire for more time to integrate the concepts:

“So much information is uploaded in a short space of time, sometimes this results in lagging in my concentration. I wish there was more days added for the modules to be well consumed.”

Secondly, the learning-by-doing process, where journalists are coached through producing stories, is central to them integrating their learning into ongoing practice. One respondent suggested:

“Though the exercises were straining emotionally they made me able to think out of the box.”

Future training should budget more time to allow for journalists to produce two or more stories, with adequate mentoring time throughout the process.

Thirdly, a comprehensive screening of applicants helps to ensure that participants with the appropriate journalistic skills and experience are recruited.

Lastly, where participants are not publishing or broadcasting in English, the training needs to include translators who represent the diversity of other languages in the room. These

translators will need to be well versed in the science of climate change as they will need to explain complex concepts, rather than just provide a verbatim translation.

Conclusions

Community journalism is central to advancing the human rights and development imperatives of the communities they serve, through fostering participation in democratic decision making, transparency and accountability in the realm of governance, and through educating their constituencies. Providing community journalists with the skills to report on the impacts of climate change within their communities, and function adequately as watchdogs of the governance responses to mitigating and adapting to climate change, is therefore imperative.

This paper has presented an overview of a journalist training course designed to address the need for print and broadcast content targeting rural communities with a key focus on climate change related content in South Africa. The paper offers insight into the structure of the course, outlines key reflections on the course, and provides recommendations to support similar trainings in the future. While the learnings from this process indicate a paucity of knowledge and skill amongst many of the participants, it identifies the value of creating training programmes that address these needs. Skills based in climate change education and science reporting in general are likely to be readily transferable to environmental and science education more broadly.

Acknowledgements

This paper reflects on a training course that was supported by the Climate Support Programme which is implemented by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and funded by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU) under its International Climate Initiative (IKI). The project was conducted in partnership with the Department of Environmental Affairs, Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF).

References

- Bolsen, T. & Shapiro, M. A. (2017). The US news media, polarization on climate change, and pathways to effective communication, environmental communication. *Environmental Communication* 12(2), 149-163, doi: [10.1080/17524032.2017.1397039](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2017.1397039)
- Department of Basic Education (DBE), (2017). Rural education draft policy. Government Gazette No. 41399.
- Hatcher, J. (2013). Journalism in a Complicated Place: The Role of Community Journalism in South Africa. *Community Journalism* 2:1, 49-67.
- MacBride, S. (1980). Many voices, one world : towards a new more just and more efficient world information and communication order. New York: Unipub.
- Moore, R. C. & Gillis, T. L. (2005). Transforming Communities: Community Journalism in Africa. *Transformations Journal of Media, Culture & Technology*. [Issue 10](#). ISSN 14443775.
- Moser, S. C. (2016). Reflections on climate change communication research and practice in the second decade of the 21st century: what more is there to say? *WIREs-Climate Change*, 7: 345-369. doi:[10.1002/wcc.403](https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.403)
- Schramm, W. (1964). Mass Media and National Development. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Olausson, U. & Berglez, P. (2014). Media and climate change: Four long-standing research challenges revisited. *Environmental Communication*, 8(2), 249-265, doi: [10.1080/17524032.2014.906483](https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2014.906483)

Authors:

Brett Cohen

The Green House, 70 Rosmead Avenue, Kenilworth, Cape Town, 7708, South Africa

Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7700, South Africa.

brett@tgh.co.za, +27(0)21 6712616, www.tgh.co.za



Prof Brett Cohen is a director and principal consultant at The Green House Consultants, based on Cape Town, South Africa. He is also an Honorary Associate Professor in the Department of Chemical Engineering at the University of Cape Town. Brett has an undergraduate and PhD degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of Cape Town. He has worked on climate change and sustainability-related projects in South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, Kenya, Lesotho, Botswana, Chile, India and Peru, in both academia and the private sector for the last 15 years. He has worked on numerous consulting projects for government, industry and NGOs that relate to greenhouse gas mitigation and its implications in the South African context. Brett is a C2 National Research Foundation (NRF) rated researcher. He has been appointed as a Lead Author on the IPCC Assessment Report 6 (AR6), is registered on the UNFCCC's Roster of Experts, a roster of individuals who are nominated by their Governments to contribute to a number of UNFCCC processes.

Leonie Joubert

leonie@leoniejoubert.co.za +27 83 443 2988 www.leoniejoubert.co.za



Leonie Joubert is a science writer and journalist, science communications trainer, and public speaker, who has 17 years' experience in writing about the fields of climate change, energy

policy issues, food security, invasive alien species, and environmental resource economics. She has published six books, book chapter contributions, and a range of journalism in this time. She works across a wide range of styles, including long-form journalism, hard news, feature and opinion-style journalism, book writing, and, more recently, podcasting. On the back of her experience as a content specialist and science writer, Leonie also works extensively in the field of science communications training, providing communications support to journalists, academics, scientists, and civil society organisations in science writing and journalistic technique. These processes involve designing, organising and facilitating training workshops, and conducting one-on-one writing mentoring. This has involved working with journalists in South Africa and abroad in order to skill them up in the area of climate change reporting.

Article thumbnail image:

