

Climate change journalism in South Africa misses the mark by ignoring people's daily experiences

By Enock Sithole

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South Africa's media houses rely too heavily on events like conferences, climate disasters and the release of scientific papers in their reporting on climate change. That's a problem: it creates the potential for day-to-day issues related to climate change, like ongoing mitigation and adaptation efforts, to go unreported.

Source: www.unsplash.com

That's one of the key findings of [a study](#) I recently conducted into how the country's media cover the climate crisis.

I also identified major shortcomings in overall communication on the climate crisis by key stakeholders in South Africa – policymakers, captains of industry, scientists and non-governmental organisations.

These shortcomings are hugely worrying given what [scientists say](#) lies in store for South Africa in the coming years. Along with many parts of the broader southern African region, it is projected to become both warmer and drier, putting pressure on water security and agriculture. Increasing heatwaves will affect human health and result in deaths. Tropical cyclones are likely to become stronger, with catastrophic impacts in central and southern regions of Mozambique and certain areas in north-eastern South Africa.

The kind of coverage favoured by South African media probably doesn't do much to improve the public's understanding of climate change because they cannot associate the reporting with their day-to-day lives – even though, as [the science makes clear](#), the toll is tremendous. It also leaves the impression that climate change is an issue for elites, politicians and activists, and not ordinary people.

'Ignoring the end of the world'

The study was jointly commissioned by the Wits University Centre for Journalism (South Africa) and Fojo Media Institute of Linnaeus University, Sweden.

To conduct the study, I reviewed some 476 articles published between September 2021 and August 2022 about climate change in 11 online South African publications that report frequently on the issue. I also interviewed 42 people from government institutions, civil society and the corporate sector, as well as members of the media and climate change scientists.

The majority of climate change-related stories I reviewed were about the release of scientific reports, or high-profile global meetings.

However, some local media houses barely covered perhaps the most important and high-profile of these publications: the [Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC).



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The presentation of the report by UN secretary-general, António Guterres, on 9 August 2021, was covered live by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and *Al Jazeera*, and dominated their bulletins throughout the day. None of South Africa's news networks covered the report's release on the day. This choice led South African political scientist Steven Friedman [to declare](#): "Mainstream media ignore the end of the world".

Foreign news dominates

Another key finding of the study is that South Africa's media have relied on news from foreign news networks in their reporting on the climate crisis.

This dominance of foreign news reports creates the impression among audiences that climate change is not a local concern. It has been [well established](#) in [media theory](#) that if some development is not reported in the media, it is viewed as less important than those that are.

This reporting also creates a psychological distance between audiences and climate change; they come to see it as a distant problem.

After the fact

Where local stories were covered, these tended to centre on disasters. One example was extensive reporting on the disastrous floods in the KwaZulu-Natal province in April 2022, in which the media mentioned climate change as the cause.

Of course, the coverage of climate disasters is an obvious choice for any newsroom. But, as some interviewees in my study pointed out, communities need ongoing reporting on the climate crisis to inform and educate them about adaptation so they can prepare themselves for future disasters. Reporting only after the fact of a disaster was not, they said, particularly helpful.

The interviewees also argued that climate change news was not attractive to most audiences because it did not talk to their

pressing day-to-day concerns. They decried the fact that most articles on the climate crisis were published in online media and some were behind paywalls. This was seen as limiting public access, particularly by ordinary people who need the information the most because they are [especially vulnerable](#) to the effects of climate change.

Finally, interviewees lambasted communication from stakeholders other than the media. They suggested that this stifled media coverage. If institutions such as the government, for instance, were communicating more extensively on the crisis, the media would follow suit and improve their own coverage.

Recommendations

The findings of the study could be addressed in several ways. For instance, I propose an indaba (workshop) involving key stakeholders like the government, NGOs, scientists, policymakers and journalists to discuss the issue of climate change journalism and the overall communication of the crisis in South Africa.

Academic institutions should also introduce courses on climate change journalism and communication.

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