Environmental Reporting and Media Development:
Equipping Journalists with the Training and Tools to Cover a Critical Beat

BY JENNIFER DORROH

In the coming decades, climate change is poised to disrupt the global economy, dividing the world's regions into winners and losers. Low-income countries stand to lose the most, yet environmental reporting around the world often fails to inform the public on a level that transcends the politics of the moment.

Media development organizations are helping to change that. They and their partners on the ground train reporters and citizens to cover environmental news and issues; support investigations; and create innovative ways to gather information, present environmental data, and engage the public.

Media development programs centered on environmental news can serve as a model for how to boost quality journalism and innovation more generally across the media and how to bring issue-driven donors into the media development sector to expand independent-minded topical coverage.

"Kicked to the Bottom of the Pile"

The environment "is so fundamental to our well-being and our futures that responsible media of any kind would want to give it a certain amount of attention," said Peter Whitehead, communications director for the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) in an interview. "In many developing countries, though,

it gets kicked to the bottom of the pile. Economic progress is the focus, and there is an environmental price to pay. It potentially compromises our futures and our children's." Yet, despite its importance, the environment rarely gets the coverage it deserves.

Journalists and media development organizations say that lack of resources and specialization, as well as the perception that environmental news won't draw an audience, present the major challenges to better coverage of the topic.

It's a broad beat, encompassing everything from wildlife trafficking to climate change, notes Fiona Macleod, founder of the Oxpeckers Center for Investigative Environmental Journalism in South Africa. "Despite the fact that it's such a huge area for one little person to cover, those stories get assigned between politics and other topics," she said in an interview.

"Environmental journalists always end up quite close to the bottom of the pile," she says. "Oxpeckers is trying to pull them up by their bootstraps" by teaching the next

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Amazon deforestation

generation of environmental reporters basic skills as well as "how to make best use of modern technology that is on offer." The center also reports on environmental threats, such as cross-border rhinoceros poaching, that traditional news outlets often ignore.

"Mainstream news organizations tend to focus a lot on politics, crime, entertainment, and sports," said Patrick Butler, vice president for programs at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in an interview. "When there are programs that focus on issues like health and the environment, you get a rolling of the eyes about donor-driven agendas at some news organizations. You still have to convince the media organizations that see this regular parade of opportunities to cover specific things that this is a topic worth covering."

However, media development organizations craft topic-specific programs to build skills that can be applied to other areas as well, improving journalism across the board. Some projects teach basic journalism skills, while others train reporters to capture, understand, and analyze data; harness the power of the crowd; and use mobile devices to gather and distribute the news. Still others build and spread new technology.

"You're not just improving the ability to report on the topic, but helping improve the tools and technology for better storytelling," Butler says. "All of those things can come together to improve the quality of journalism."

Internews has developed a training model that mixes technical and scientific knowledge with basic journalism skills such as "how to find good sources, and how to make sure you quote them accurately," said James Fahn, executive director of Internews Earth Journalism

Network (EJN), in an interview. "How do you produce a compelling narrative for the story? How do you turn a complex, global, or scientific issue into a local and compelling story? These are skills that can be useful for all kinds of coverage."

Internews also aims to bring program participants into its global network of journalists committed to excellence in environmental coverage. Fahn learned about the power of journalism networks during a decade in Thailand covering the environmental beat for local news outlets. Individual reporters, weary of struggling to wrest data and the truth from officials, formed the Thai Society of Environmental Journalists. "We found there was more clout in numbers," Fahn says. "If one of us asked the Minister of Industry why companies were dumping mercury in the Gulf of Thailand, he could ignore us. But if a whole group of us asked, we were much harder to ignore." That group is still active in lobbying for information as well as in peer-to-peer training both informally and in seminars.

Fahn helps Internews develop and work with similar networks in the Philippines, Indonesia, and many other countries. These groups "have become institutions in their own right. They become our local partners. They know the local language and the sensitivities where they are," he says.

Starting in 2004, he applied the network concept globally by launching EJN. The network, now managed by Brazilian environmental reporter, data journalist, and media innovator Gustavo Faleiros, has trained more than 4,000 participants and has more than 5,000 members. The network has built up a base of mentors who have created projects, often with the help of other members, and can now be called upon to advise others.

"The idea is to share knowledge and make projects easier to replicate," Faleiros said in an interview. EJN is turning the Geojournalism Handbook, which Faleiros launched as a set of tutorials on data journalism and mapping during his ICFJ Knight International Journalism Fellowship, into a hub for collaboration on projects focused on environmental journalism.

EJN provides reporting grants, runs reporting contests, and leads webinars on key issues and major environmental summits such as the United Nations conference on climate change this year in Paris. Ahead of that meeting, the network is offering grants for reporting that will "highlight what is at stake for those most directly impacted by the consequences of our changing planet," according to the EJN website. To improve the reach of the stories EJN funds, the network also increasingly helps participants find broader distribution for their work, Faleiros says.

Revealing the Earth's Story with Data

Faleiros is a pioneer in capturing data to report environmental stories. During his ICFJ Knight Fellowship, he launched InfoAmazonia, a site that covers the nine-country Amazon region by pulling geographic data from NASA satellites and other sources, displaying them on digital maps updated in real time, and looking for patterns and stories.

He has also shared the code for JEO, the platform that underpins InfoAmazonia, with journalists eager to monitor, interpret, and share environmental data from their own regions. In Indonesia, Ekuatorial tracks oceans, forests, and natural disasters. In Argentina, Bolivia, and

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Mapping environmental threats:
Forest fires in the Bolivian Amazon

Paraguay, CartoChaco monitors deforestation and other threats to the Chaco Plain. Kenya's Land Quest maps the profits from drilling, while South Africa's Oxpeckers Center for Investigative Environmental Journalism tracks and exposes rhinoceros poaching and the looting of other natural resources.

Geojournalism is "a great way to tell stories," the Oxpeckers Center's Macleod says. Stories told with interactive maps are "easily digestible and communicate a lot of info with the click of a few buttons."

Sometimes the data environmental reporters need are inaccessible to the public—or simply don't exist at all. Journalists are working to close that gap by using low-cost sensors to monitor air and water quality, noise pollution, and more.

EJN built a prototype sensor, DustDuino, to detect particulate matter in the air, and ordered the production of 100 sensors, which it is sending to journalists interested in gathering local air quality data.

Other projects call on the crowd to contribute what they observe in embattled ecosystems. "Communities in the Central African rainforest can now report illegal logging in their territories as it happens, potentially enabling real-time law enforcement action," wrote Rhett Butler on the Mongabay environmental news site. People in remote areas can send information from their mobile devices via satellite, which means they do not have to depend on a conventional mobile network.

Drone journalism uses unmanned vehicles, camera-equipped balloons, and remotely controlled devices to capture aerial views of inaccessible places. Drones bring a unique perspective to stories ranging from the aftermath of the Vanuatu cyclone to footage of Nairobi's controversial Dandora dumpsite.

To report on flooding at Kenya's Lake Nakuru National Park, reporters typically "hire a fisherman. They row about, risking life and expensive equipment," Kenyan journalist Dickens Olewe told BBC Africa. "The pictures they come back with are pretty much at eye level, and don't tell much about the scale of the disaster."

Using a drone to capture a bird's-eye view of the park convinced Olewe of the devices' power to cover remote areas. He launched AfricanskyCAM (originally called "Africa Drone") to establish "Africa's first newsroom-based 'eye in the sky' drones and camera-equipped balloons to help media that cannot afford news helicopters cover breaking news in dangerous situations or difficult-to-reach locations," according to his winning entry in the 2012 African News Innovation Challenge.
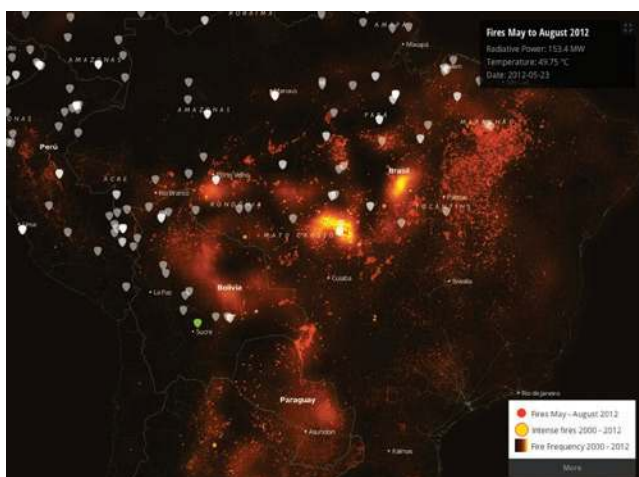
Left: Dandora dumpsite in the Nairobi suburbs image from AfricanskyCAM

Right: DJI Phantom 2 Vision drone

Funding Without Flacking

While donor interest in innovation and experimentation abounds, most of the major media development foundations don't focus specifically on the environmental beat. This means that funding to improve the quality of environmental coverage tends either to comprise a small part of more broadly targeted grants or to come from issue-oriented donors.

Fahn at Internews oversees what is likely the largest environmental journalism program in the media development sector. EJN's projected budget this year is $2 million, while environmentally focused media development makes up such a small part of most implementers' and donors' budgets that they don't track it by topic.

Although the U.S. government is Internews' primary funder, the vast majority of Fahn's fundraising comes from private foundations and donors, usually about a dozen at any given time, he says. Many of these focus on specific issues such as climate change or deforestation.

Fahn says media development is "an underutilized field. There's a natural tendency for donors to support the groups they're familiar with and ask them to do communications work, but they should be willing to look outside their traditional partners," which are typically advocacy organizations, he says.

"The risk in just supporting environmental groups is that they could be preaching to the choir," Fahn says. In contrast, the news media reach a wider audience, and often tell more nuanced stories.

Kai Lee, who leads the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's science sub-program, concurs. He says journalists form a bridge between the public and scientists, who often lack the journalists' understanding of what topics and information the public might find compelling.

To harness "the investigative powers of the media to tackle a research-like question," the Packard Foundation this spring asked EJN to seek stories on disruptive innovation for marine conservation, Lee said in an interview. "If you look back 50 years, ocean science has been transformed. If you look ahead, what might happen in the next 50 years?" Lee asks. "Scientists can create models and help forecast what is probable. But good journalism could stimulate debate on what is possible."

The Packard Foundation does not seek specific outcomes or review the stories before publication. "We don't exert editorial authority," Lee says. "The point is to raise the general level of social attention that's being paid to an area or topic."

Media development implementers stressed the importance of maintaining editorial independence.

Jakarta floods

Fahn believes a key approach, especially when working with a new funder, is to explain everything from the outset and build editorial independence into the grant agreement. "We'll often try to sit down with potential donors or partners and explain that we want to build media capacity to tell these stories and explain issues to the public, but not to take sides on issues themselves," he says.

Macleod, whose Oxpeckers Center has worked with a mix of media-focused and issue-focused funders, says her organization "will allow a certain level of scrutiny, but the bottom line is that we will never allow [donors] to change facts or style. If they want to see something beforehand, if they are paying for it, why not? But they can't intervene in what is produced editorially."

"We're a media organization, and [funders] are quite happy to accept that," she says. "We've never had any [funding] organization put a spanner in the works."

When taking on new programs, ICFJ's Butler says, implementers should avoid "doing something so specific that it becomes advocacy. We turn down things sometimes because it feels like it's pushing us too close to becoming an advocate."

In some cultures, of course, journalists feel freer to take more of an advocacy role, Internews's Fahn points out. "We don't consider ourselves an advocacy organization. We tend not to take a particular stand, but if our members do, that's their right."

MDIF invested in Green Radio, which started as a segment on Radio KBR in Indonesia, after heavy rains flooded about 60 percent of Jakarta in 2007. "We then decided to develop the segment into a radio station of its own, specifically aimed at helping Jakartans during severe flooding," its founder, environmental journalist Tosca Santoso, told the *Jakarta Post*.

Part of Green Radio's mission was to help people and teach them to live a more eco-friendly lifestyle, so at MDIF's encouragement, Radio KBR set up an NGO to work separately from its for-profit media company, MDIF's Whitehead says.

MDIF does not focus specifically on environmental journalism projects, but its model could be adapted by others who do. While MDIF is a nonprofit organization, its focus is helping media organizations become profitable, independent, and self-sustaining.

"We take a market-driven approach. In most countries we work in, the only capital that enables a media business to grow comes from someone with a vested interest," Whitehead says. "They'll say, 'Sure, I'll lend you the financing, but you need to report on my business.' Often, our investment is the only one with no strings attached, other than that they must provide independent journalism."

"We try to bring together investors, high-net worth individuals, and media outlets. Rather than providing grants that might help an outlet for a few years, we try to provide them with business advice to help them stick around a lot longer," Whitehead says. Investors in successful companies will receive financial returns, but profits on any MDIF money "go back or are recycled into other parts of the work."

While the open-source ethos prevails among many media innovators developing technology, Internews Faleiros thinks that licensing or customizing technology could provide a revenue stream for some media development projects. JEO, the mapping and publishing platform, is open source, but when partners wanted Faleiros's team to help them adapt JEO for their region and project, they paid for the development of new features. This helped sustain the work financially and benefitted all of the other sites using the platform.

In countries where print media are still profitable, sustaining a less-common coverage area can sometimes be a matter of simply proving reader interest in a topic, Butler says. In Tanzania, ICFJ Knight international journalism fellow Joachim Buwembo helped the *Guardian* newspaper start a weekly agriculture section, "Kilimo Kwanza." It continues to thrive, even spinning off into radio and TV news, Butler says, because it draws readers and because of the paper's ability to translate those readers into advertising revenue. He thinks the same model could apply to environmental coverage.

Environmental reports can create new audiences for news organizations. A multimedia report by a Nicaraguan newspaper about the deforestation of Central America's largest forest inspired young people to engage with the news outlet in unprecedented numbers.

"These are topics that are of interest to young readers, especially if you're doing it in a way that engages young people more, in a way that draws people in through social media, multimedia, and citizen journalism

content," Butler says. The model is still evolving, but "it does seem logical to me that if you can increase traffic, you should be able to increase revenue."

How Media Development Can Lead on Environmental Issues

In the next few decades, we face unprecedented challenges and tough choices about how to use Earth's resources. Whether we thrive as a species will depend on our ability to think globally and creatively, and to work across borders to solve our common problems.

News media worldwide should play a key role in helping us understand these problems, and in identifying and spreading the most effective solutions.

The media development sector can also take a leadership role in this conversation. The sector can identify the most effective and engaging technologies and storytelling methods. It can channel resources into driving adoption of the pioneering work of environmental reporters, who are among the most innovative and collaborative practitioners of the journalism craft. The sector can partner with issue-based donors and perhaps even marketers to craft a compelling case for the importance of environmental news in regions where the topic is often neglected.

Such a robust environmental media development effort could improve environmental news and journalism overall. What's more, it could better position us to face the environmental challenges to come.

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ASSISTANCE

Center for International Media Assistance
National Endowment for Democracy

1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR • WASHINGTON, DC 20004

PHONE: (202) 378-9700
EMAIL: CIMA@ned.org
URL: http://cima.ned.org

Mark Nelson
SENIOR DIRECTOR

National Endowment for Democracy
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Dorroh is an independent journalist and media trainer. She is a former managing editor of *American Journalism Review* and former director of the International Journalists' Network (IJNet), produced by the International Center for Journalists. She served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Belize. She speaks Spanish.

Dorroh has taught news reporting, writing, and digital media skills for organizations including ICFJ, the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, the United Nations Environmental Program, and the Humphrey Fellowships. Her work has appeared in publications including *American Journalism Review,* the *Wall Street Journal* Europe, the *Los Angeles Times,* the *Baltimore Sun, Travel + Leisure,* and PBS MediaShift. She is based in Guadalajara, Mexico.