

**TIMES
EVOKE**

OF SCIENCE, SENSE & SENSIBILITY

Climate reporting is the media's greatest challenge — and opportunity. Global warming is literally the biggest story unfolding on Earth today, its every twist — NASA finds July, 2023 was the hottest known month ever on the planet — a new chapter in an extraordinary saga. We all now share a battery of 'highest evers' — the highest atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), the densest methane, the greatest plastic pollution, the sharpest losses of biodiversity that could mend some of the damages humanity is inflicting on air, water and ground. This concatenation of catalysts is creating the perfect storm — in just the last month, heatwaves raged across Europe, floods hit China, rain triggered landslides in India and wildfires even swept through Hawaii's golden beaches and lush forests.

Such physical manifestations are one part of this epic. The other is social impacts — carbon emissions intensify heat which spurs extreme precipitation and intense dryness. Both are dangerous for health and wealth — the International Renewable Energy Agency estimates \$7.5 trillion worth of real estate is at risk from global warming. These also cause everyday catastrophes, from crop failures — many in India felt the recent loss of tomato harvests — to the breakdown of social cohesion. From the Sahel to Sudan, strife has spiralled in Africa's climate-impacted regions — studies find climate change, a 'crisis multiplier', increased conflicts globally by 20% in the 20th century and can push up strife five-fold now, with clashes over shrinking water, land and other existential assets.

All these factors propel media to a central role on global warming's stage. Amidst fears, divides and deceptions, honest reporting is crucial — the media's verity, gravity and empathy, bringing together expertise and tracking the climate-hit, can help us learn what can be done. As Times Evoke's global experts emphasise, climate change need not only be a tragic tale — it can also have hope, highlighting adaptations and mitigations that are possible. The media's work has never been more exacting — or exciting — as it steps beyond the daily din to present our planet's science, sense and sensibility. Join Times Evoke in tracking climate reportage — and together writing a better story.

'Climate change is here to stay — Indian media reports on its complexity better than the West'

Sunita Narain is director general of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE). Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, she discusses best practices in reportage of the environmental crisis:

How do you characterise mainstream media's coverage of climate change?

This crisis is very much in our face today and mainstream media reports on its disasters as these happen. Whether it is the rain and landslides that occurred in Himachal Pradesh this week or the floods in Delhi recently, the media reports on all these events. A saying goes, 'If it bleeds, it leads' and there's no denying climate change is bleeding both locations and communities now. Hence, it is often covered in detail.



However, many climate change issues go much deeper than one event. To even understand whether certain disasters happened because of global warming is a matter of complexity — the Himachal tragedy, for instance, is underpinned by the fact that the Himalayas are an extremely vulnerable region, these mountains have undergone maldevelopment and are now facing climate impacts. Within climate phenomena, the media needs to understand enough science to see the changes taking place in the Indian monsoon, why these are linked to the temperature of the Bay of Bengal, the arrival of western disturbances, etc.

Getting a handle on these complexities takes time but we, as consumers of media, have become impatient and demand extremely short news with no greys, just black and white. Yet, complexity and nuance are inescapable parts of climate reporting.

Secondly, while most media comprehensively cover global warming's catastrophic events, they aren't as thorough on the follow-ups — yet, that is



IN THIS STRANGE NEW WORLD: Global warming is showing many shades, from wildfires sparked in Europe and Canada (L) to heavy rain and landslides in the Himalayan regions of India (R) — it is imperative climate reporters spread awareness of sustainability

where many stories are. Consider the subsidence and caving-in which were taking place across the Chamoli region. Do we know what happened to those displaced people — were they relocated? What can the government do best in this situation? In Assam, deluges take place every year, forcing many to live in camps for months. What happens to their lives? Climate change is not a one-off story — an understanding of the processes that drive it and the events that follow it are both crucial.

Are there broad differences in how climate change is covered by Western media versus the global South?

Absolutely — that reflects the politics around it. In that context, the Indian media is far better than Western media which is frequently biased. The latter are not willing to be open to diverse perspectives on climate justice, environmental

equity or development, including the fact that growing economies like India depend on coal — these are not views welcomed by many in the Western media and proponents of climate justice often find themselves shut out or disinvited. Such discussions are also a part of geopolitics now which is shaped by who gets heard — frank discussions of climate justice or environmental history are often unwelcome in Western outlets, despite their claims of impartiality. The Indian media does better — it accurately grasps the politics of global warming and reports fairly.

How is the environmental crisis represented in regional media within India?

At CSE and our publication 'Down To Earth', we work closely with regional journalists across the country — I find a huge eagerness there to understand the crucial links that make up the climate story. Regional journalists are closer to the ground and can report more consistently on the sequences of a disaster. Unless there's an election or a catastrophe, it is harder for the mainstream media to report on rural India, given that these are not the classes which consume their products. Regional media is better placed for this — interestingly, instead of vocalising stories always as 'climate change', regional media reports on how weather patterns are changing, farmers are being impacted, agrarian distress is deepening, etc. There is a great desire to tell this powerful story

thoroughly and these journalists look for more knowledge to make the necessary connections.

Global warming is the most intricate story on Earth today — even scientists are struggling to make the links between its manifestations in different locations. Media needs to learn the science as well and, as I see it, regional reporters are striving to do this.

Are there other meaningful insights you'd give to chroniclers of the planetary crisis?

As mentioned, it is extremely important to understand the full nature of this situation and make essential connections between situations. Global warming is an unfolding disaster but there are also messages of hope in its fold, just like there are areas of greater investigation where the media could bring out what could be done better. It is very important for us all to note the states and communities which are achieving degrees of climate resilience. Global warming isn't



TAKE HEED: Can we still crowd our hills?

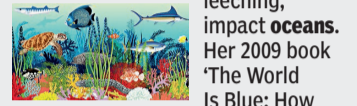
WORDS OF WISDOM

Writers have shone a light on the ecological crisis — and how to halt this. **Biologist Rachel Carson's** 1962 book 'Silent Spring' examined the impacts of pesticides on the environment.



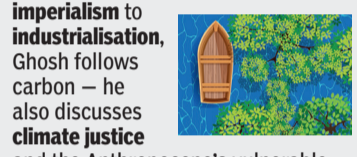
Carson wrote of how toxic chemicals were hurting multiple species — she found **DDT was destroying bird populations** and warned of a world bereft of birdsong. She also showed DDT was carcinogenic, her writing then key in prompting controls on its use

Marine scientist Sylvia Earle describes how human actions, from plastic dumping to agricultural leaching, impact oceans.



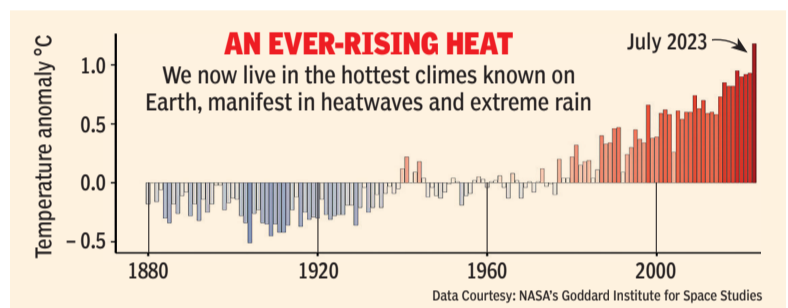
Her 2009 book 'The World Is Blue: How Our Fate and the Ocean's Are One' outlines how **ocean ecosystems are damaged**, humans will lose **crucial oxygen and food sources**. Earle also describes **sustainable strategies** to safeguard the oceans

Anthropologist Amit Ghosh spans regional sites — 2004's 'The Hungry Tide' explores how the **Sundarbans fare with rising waters** — and a **panorama of history** tracing the carbon economy. From imperialism to industrialisation, Ghosh follows carbon — he also discusses **climate justice** and the Anthropocene's vulnerable



Research: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Smithsonian Magazine, The New York Times, Yale University, Scientific American

just heavy despair — it is a mixed picture. It is here to stay now and demands grappling with complexities involving science, development, history and ethics. It is the job of the media to report on it with clarity, offering people the best suggestions on timely adaptation and sustainability actions. We all face global warming now — the role of the media in building courage and resilience will be crucial.



Red pandas are famed for their **rusty coat** which camouflages them in trees covered with red-brown moss. Their bushy tails protect them from cold — but not from humans. Found in **India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and China**, red pandas are now **endangered**, facing **habitat loss** — they have declined by 40% in the last 20 years as **agriculture and logging** cut down their forests and canopies, leaving them facing **poachers** seeking their pelt

With their hue-changing skin, **chameleons** are **quick to hide** — yet, they're unmistakable with their long tongues, horns and monkey-like tails. **Half of Earth's chameleons are in Madagascar** but over 35% confront extinction, their restricted ranges lost to **farming, timber trade and climate change** which alters habitats, leaving chameleons literally with **no place to hide**



Once, the **sparrow** was found in **nooks in Indian homes**. This differed from 1950s China when peasants slaughtered millions of 'pests'. However, the little being now faces **radiation, pesticides and the loss of native trees** — its numbers have shrunk by 80%. Along with the sparrow flies away **another existence**, when many happily shared their home with other lives



AS THEIR WORLD CHANGES...

'We're wrecking our life support system — that's the big story'

Elizabeth Kolbert is a Pulitzer Prize-winning environmental writer. Speaking to Times Evoke, she discusses the 'feedback loop' in ecological coverage:

Media reportage of the climate crisis is extremely important — it sets the political agenda and sparks conversation. If the media doesn't report, people tend to think global warming is not significant — yet, this issue could not be more vital. Today, mainstream media is doing a much better job of covering climate change than a decade ago. Reportage has both increased and improved but the coverage often has a hard time conveying the magnitude and gravity of the problem. In recent weeks, we've seen wildfires in Canada, smog in New York and wildfires in Hawaii but representing the links between these and the underlying carbon catastrophe differs across platforms. If you're reading some media, you'd have a pretty good sense of this situation — if you're relying on others, you'd have no idea of what's going on. Our understanding of climate change in the US relies on where you get your news. A lot of this variation is based on a partisan divide. If you're reading Democrat-leaning media, you're getting one kind of story — if you're looking at right-wing media, you get a totally different one.



UNEASY SEAS: Oceans are at their warmest ever now

What we are seeing this summer is climate events can happen very quickly and disastrously — climate scientists kept warning us about thresholds which we might be seeing early signs of. These are stages crossing which you get impacts you no longer have any control over — we are now seeing many factors moving faster than models predicted and that should be frightening to people, if their media helps them understand this.

However, people also get used to the new normal, as it were — Phoenix, Arizona, just

had 31 days where the temperature crossed 101 degrees but you didn't have many saying this is an unliveable place. Instead, people adjust even in such a terrible cycle — we keep doing what we've always been doing, including cranking up the air-conditioning (if you have it). This will exacerbate the problem — we aren't being able to think our way out to a different style of living. Climate change also encompasses all ranges of involvement now — some people care deeply about it, others don't bother at all. What is clear is that despite growing media coverage, sufficient Americans don't care enough to change our politics.

One of the problems we face is that people increasingly get their information from social media. Even to the extent that it's accurate, this tends to be very superficial, so it's hard to grasp climate change which is more complicated than can be described in a tweet. Social media has the effect of reducing all conversations to the most simplistic concepts — so, when you post on climate change, you get a lot of unbelievable, even nonsensical responses back.

As reporters, we all tend to state something that is happening, like the fires in Maui or in Canada — but what is really going on constantly, every second of every day, is all kinds of huge human systems are fundamentally altering the biogeochemical cycles upon which life on Earth depends. Climate change is one manifestation — we are also altering the nitrogen cycle, the phosphorus balance, etc. We are messing with these fundamental planetary aspects which evolved over many millions of years. We're unravelling our life support system and that's hard to convey when you're focusing on a crisis at a time — yet, that is the big story media must highlight.

Another factor that militates against good coverage is that even reliable news outlets are becoming click-driven now — if people aren't clicking on climate stories, that generates a lack of interest from editors and owners of organisations. But that creates its own feedback loop where people don't care, coverage declines and then, even more people don't care — that way lies bigger disaster. All of us in the media must be aware of navigating this carefully. A lot rests on that.

'Social media reinforces polarisation on climate change — this impacts policies'

Mathematician and scientist **Andrea Baronchelli** tells Times Evoke about his new study on how social media narratives on climate change get shaped — and what they can influence:

I'm a professor of complexity science at City University, London and the Token Economy theme lead at the Alan Turing Institute. I investigate human dynamics and social norms in decentralised socio-technical systems — this means looking at what we do when there is no centralised authority telling us how to behave. The two main streams I work on are social media, which intermediates the production and consumption of information — before, there were only newspapers and the common person could not produce information — and blockchain which does this with the production and consumption of value.

Recently, we put together a first analysis of polarisation around climate change on social media 'polarisation' is the existence of a big divide between different positions which tend to become more radically separated, with few inter-actions between them. We focused initially on the discourse around the yearly COP conferences, analysing social media content between COP21 and COP26. Until COP25, the discourse on Twitter, now X, was essentially non-polarised — there was a majority camp which mostly agreed on climate policies and a smaller minority camp, dominated by climate-specific influencers, many sceptical about global warming. We also checked polarisation from a structural approach or who people interacted with, retweeted, etc. — we found cohesiveness in the two communities'

patterns of interaction, camp members affirming each other. With COP26 in 2021, something changed radically — the minority camp grew a lot with more people joining it and its conversation broadened to encompass diverse influencers, media outlets and right-leaning politicians. The debate now included broader topics beyond only climate change, like the economy (criticising the green transition, for instance) as well as people who were sceptical about Covid vaccinations. But one topic still connected the two camps — this was accusations of 'political

hypocrisy', such as both claiming delegates to COP were travelling on private jets being contrary to ecological advocacy — but faultlines often deepen again on issues of climate equity

two 'sides', one agreeing, one disagreeing, giving people an impression of strongly divided camps. The media thus exaggerates minoritarian views on science, simply because that entertains and engages people. There is also significant evidence that people on social media look for information they already agree with — this is called 'confirmation bias'. So, if you were searching for information putting a question mark on climate change, you're likely to end up in a bubble of climate deniers

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A NEW ABNORMAL

READERS WRITE

Dear Times Evoke, Sarah Besky's insights (12th August) in TE made a great difference to how I perceive my morning brew. To look at tea plantations as stemming from colonial conquest and understand how remnants of that system continue was an eye-opener. The ecological impacts of monocropping has also added to our challenges. It's high time we adopt more sustainable processes. — **Shruti Chatterjee**, Kolkata

I really enjoyed TE's questions and Sarah Besky's poetic and thorough answers — this feature brought out very sensitive developments about ecological values, the life of tea garden labour, the attachment to a region growing tea, the repercussions of monocropping and the huge colonial effects shaping the Anthropocene. TE is always such a refreshing read! — **Saumil Raval**, Ahmedabad

Every Saturday, TE in The Times of India introduces me to new things. I was unaware that tea is known as a 'hero crop'. I loved the beautiful article on tea which showed how plantations grew worldwide with colonialism. Thank you for spreading awareness amongst inquisitive readers, TE! — **Aditi Awasthi**, Gwalior

Every week, TE intricately discusses environmental issues. Sarah Besky on the history of tea production was astonishing. She illuminated the long-lasting impacts human have on social systems and ecologies, brimming even in a cup. TE, you always do wonderful coverage on environment and humanity! — **Sekar Shanmugam**, via email

Share your thoughts at: timesevokes@timesgroup.com You can also read Times Evoke online at: www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/times-evolve



SMOG IN THE CITY: Climate change has no borders — Canadian fires impacted NYC