

# 3. Asian journalism education and key challenges of climate change

## A preliminary study

**Commentary:** The mass media in the Asia Pacific region are reporting the environmental disasters that are regularly hitting the planet, religiously, and journalists learn as they go along. However, the reporting has focused mainly on the toll in human lives and property. This is disaster reporting and it stops short of contextualising. It does not adequately explain why the environmental disasters are happening more violently and more frequently. Not too many reporters have taken formal courses in environmental journalism. Only a very few schools are offering regular courses, or programmes in science and environmental reporting, as indicated by a mini-survey in July 2016. The vacuum in formal science and environmental education is being filled by non-government organisations offering non-formal training.

**Keywords:** Asia-Pacific, climate change, disaster reporting, environmental education, environmental journalism, environmental disasters, forest fires, journalism education, Small Island Developing States

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### Introduction

IN THE old days the typhoon season in South-East Asia usually started in July and ended in September. Nowadays, the most powerful ones are in the last two months of the year and they come even in the first half of the year.

Why? Scientists say that this is because of climate change. Climate change affects rainfall patterns, storms and droughts, growing seasons, humidity and sea level.

Farmers who depend on the rains to water their crops are not sure now when to plant or harvest. The winds and rains have become more severe. A few areas might even get cooler than warmer and vice versa.

Climate change indeed is happening, and it is caused by man. What used to be an inconvenient truth is now an undeniable fact. The ranks of those who are

‘in denial’ of this fact have been reduced to near zero as we feel the world get warmer, the storms turn more violent, the rains pour all year round, the polar icebergs melt, floods submerge cities and sea levels rise.

This climate change may threaten the survival of man on the planet today, starting with the Asia-Pacific region, where the mini island nations are.

### **Media coverage of climate change**

What are the Asia-Pacific mass media doing about this threat and what is the role of media education in the region today? It is heart-warming to note that generally the mass media are aware of the climate change phenomenon and its implications for our planet, especially to the Asia-Pacific nations. A few media organisations, like the Pacific Media Centre and SciDev.Net, are reporting extensively on the problem. A good example is *SciDev.Net*, a London-based science journalism website with an Asia-Pacific Desk. As columnist for the website, I have reported problems related to climate change in the region in the past few years. A few examples:

#### *1. Asia-Pacific Analysis: Time for SIDS to sail*

The Small Island Developing States (SIDS) held the biggest international conference ever in the Pacific in September 2014 under the auspices of the United Nations and it was hailed a success (Maslog, 2014a). It brought together 115 countries—represented by 21 heads of state and 97 ministers—plus six associate members of regional commissions and 548 civil society organisations. And most important, the conference brought some US\$1.9 billion worth of partnerships. The partnerships addressed all the crucial issues facing SIDS—sustainable development, climate change, disaster resilience, environmental protection, access to energy and social development, among others.

In my reporting of that conference, however, I raised the issue of what happens next. I said it was ironic that as conferences got larger, the problems got bigger. A concrete, time-bound SIDS road map is positive but accelerated action is key.

I quoted the *Samoa Observer*: ‘While it is easy to get lost and become totally overwhelmed by the emotions and magnitude of the issues . . . the reality of life for small island states must never be forgotten. It is quite scary in fact.’

The Samoan prime minister, Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi, added in his closing remarks to the conference: ‘The time for speeches is over. . . We must now set sail with determination that the course of action we have chartered here . . . will be addressed to achieve our priorities.’ To which we say amen.

#### *2. Asia-Pacific Analysis: Averting climate refugees*

As early as 2013, I wrote about the problem of the rising seas in the Pacific that has threatened the very survival of most of the Pacific island nations (Maslog, 2013a).

The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) met in 2013 in the Marshall Islands, where the highest point is only three meters above sea level, and pleaded with the economic superpowers that emit the most carbon to save them from becoming the world's first climate change refugees.

In their Majuro Declaration of 2013, the PIF called for urgent action from the world's biggest emitters—China, the European Union, India, Japan and the United States—to speed up moves to slow down global warming. To quote liberally from my *SciDev.Net* piece in 2013:

This desperate appeal for urgent action was hardly surprising. A number of Pacific islands are living close to the edge, literally on the front-line of climate change and its after-effects, with more frequent and severe natural disasters such as cyclones, floods, tidal surges, droughts and coral reef destruction.

Drought hit the Marshall Islands' northern atolls for the first time in recent memory, leaving many residents without enough food and water. Then, in July that year storm surges breached the sea wall that protects Majuro and flooded the capital.

Two of Kiribati's islands are already submerged. In early 2005, other islands were flooded by a high spring tide that washed away farmland, swept salt water into wells and inundated homes and a hospital.

The average elevation of most of the Pacific Islands Forum nations is about two metres above sea level. For many of the smallest and most vulnerable of these nations, the first line of defence is to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Their leaders want to galvanise a new wave of climate action beyond words and pledges. They demand concrete actions and commitments from everyone.

They cite the recent World Bank report, 'Turn Down the Heat', which warned that, without decisive climate action, even a best-case scenario could see the world warm by four degrees Celsius by the end of the century.

If temperatures increase by this amount, sea levels could rise by 50 centimetres to a metre, resulting in the loss of fresh water in many islands. Coral reef systems could be wiped out and low-lying atolls would be submerged.

But if nations act quickly enough to minimise carbon emissions, the world may still avoid the worst effects of climate change. Switching to green energy such as solar, wind, hydroelectric and geothermal could limit sea level rise. However, doing so will not guarantee that global warming will be reversed. So the fallback for these threatened Pacific island nations might just be to adapt.

Huge investments are needed to help vulnerable Pacific nations adapt to the effects of global warming and improve their resilience. The World Bank provided more than US\$8 billion in 2012 to the Pacific nations to help mitigate global temperature rises.

In Samoa, the bank is working to ‘climate proof’ transport infrastructure and help the UN improve the resilience of coastal communities. In Vanuatu, the bank and the European Union are educating farmers about the introduction of climate-resilient livestock and crops and the implementation of disaster risk management programmes. A tsunami-warning system has been set up in Port Vila, the nation’s capital, and in the city of Luganville, and hazard response systems are being improved.

Australia and New Zealand have helped Kiribati set up a project that has increased water supply by 20 per cent in the capital, South Tarawa. They are also building sea walls and have planted more than 37,000 mangroves to protect coastlines.

‘The children of the Pacific deserve our best efforts so they can grow up to live on the same soil as their parents and grandparents,’ said Axel van Trotsenburg, the World Bank’s vice-president for East Asia and the Pacific.

‘But if mitigation of global warming and adaptation to its cruel after-effects fail, the last line of defence is evacuation. Kiribati has prepared for this.’

*SciDev.Net* reported last year that the Kiribati cabinet, fearing that climate change could wipe out their archipelago, had approved a plan to buy nearly 6,000 acres on Fiji’s main island, Viti Levu, where some or all of Kiribati’s population of 103,000 could move to if necessary.

Other Pacific island nations’ leaders are still in various stages of denial. No one wants to consider this ultimate solution now.

Tony de Brum, the minister-in-assistance to the president of the Marshall Islands, said ‘if we do have to displace the population, God forbid, then we will have to start thinking about who’s going to be responsible for what happens to our nation, what happens to our sovereignty and what happens to our culture and tradition.’

Heartbreaking words indeed. But, in time, the tiny island nations may have to accept the inevitable and move to higher ground. There is only so much that science and politics can do. Just as Canute, the Danish king who ruled England in the eleventh century, could not command the sea to stop coming in, they too have limited control over climate change and efforts to prevent the Pacific Ocean from rising. (Maslog, 2013a)

I decided to quote verbatim from this article because it is the one piece that summarises in dramatic terms the perilous situation of the Pacific island nations.

### *3. Asia-Pacific Analysis: Ending Indonesia’s forest fires*

Another issue that poses a major threat to the environment in the Asia-Pacific region involves the Indonesian forest fires (Maslog, 2013b). As early as 2013, I have been writing about this predictable annual ritual. Indonesia has promised to ratify a regional treaty, an Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution negotiated in 2002, but has not done so yet, the only ASEAN member yet to ratify the treaty.

The treaty aims to eliminate transborder haze from forest fires by requiring signatory governments to stop burning, monitor prevention efforts, exchange information and help each other. Signing the treaty, however, will not put an automatic stop to the fires in Indonesia, which occur every year from May to September.

These fires are largely blamed on palm oil plantations, logging firms and farmers, all of whom resort to burning vast tracts of rainforest and peatlands to clear them for planting.

The first impact of the fires is a spike in air pollution in Sumatra, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand—reaching levels hazardous to human health. The toxic smog has pushed Indonesia to becoming the fourth largest carbon emitter in the world, after the United States, China and India.

#### *4. Asia-Pacific Analysis: A plan for all typhoon seasons*

Two of the most destructive natural disasters in the past decade happened in South-East Asia, one of which was a result of climate change. The worst was the Indonesian tsunami in 2005 that killed in one fell swoop an estimated 170,000 people in the country and up to 250,000 more in the rest of Asia (Maslog, 2014b).

The more recent one which was due to climate change was Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013—whose winds of up to 350 kilometres an hour made it the strongest typhoon to make landfall in recorded history—that battered central Philippines and resulted in more than 10,000 people dead and still missing.

These mega-disasters and many other devastating natural calamities in the Asia-Pacific in the past few years also suggest that the region is beginning to suffer more severe consequences from neglecting planning and responding only reactively.

Science has started to come to the rescue with new technology and weather surveillance systems to predict extreme weather events faster and more accurately. But sound urban planning is also key. Governments must find ways to manage urban growth and keep people away from danger zones based on convincing scientific findings.

Destroyed cities must be rebuilt on safer ground. Most major cities across South-East Asia lie on or near the coast, where they are exposed to storm surges and rising sea levels. Sound urban planning demands that we build resilient cities with weather-resistant buildings away from the coastlines.

#### *2. Abundant disaster reporting, not enough contextual journalism*

While there is adequate coverage of these climate change events like typhoons, floods, droughts and forest fires, most of the coverage is done by international media organisations like *SciDev.Net*, Pacific Media Centre, CNN, BBC and Al Jazeera.

The coverage by local media is mostly traditional disaster reporting of casualties, physical destruction and damage done to property. There is not enough contextual

reporting and little explanation of why these natural disasters are happening more often and more violently now.

I speak from experience when I make this conclusion. This observation is true in the Philippines, and generally applies also to other Asia-Pacific countries.

### *Climate change issues and mass media in Indonesia*

At least one media educator from Indonesia, Hermin Indah Wahyuni of the Center for South-East Asian Social Studies (CESASS), Jakarta, Indonesia, confirms this author's observation (Wahyuni, 2017). In a paper presented at the World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC2017) conference, and published in this edition of *PJR*, she says:

Climate change issues have been shaking up countries worldwide, but Indonesia is among the least concerned about this. The coverage of the country's mass media on this issue and other environmental problems, in general, occupies only a small proportion of total media reports regardless of the fact that Indonesia is facing some serious environmental problems, such as deforestation, haze disaster, drought, floods. . .

The issue of climate change is not a significant concern of mass media in Indonesia. This issue is less popular than corruption, terrorism, elections, economic disparities, refugee problems, sports, and even the lives of celebrities. Images of mass media in Indonesia which is dominated by television viewers and newspaper readers have not put the issue of the environment as the main agenda of the media. The most popular TV shows in Indonesia are soap opera and talent shows. News program is also actually a popular spectacle with political and economic issues as the main attraction.

Readers of newspapers in Indonesia seem more interested in political issues, entertainment, and sports. . . In Indonesia, it is easy to show that environmental issues are covered in very little numbers by mass media. One of the largest and most popular newspapers in Indonesia is *Kompas*. This newspaper has more than 2 million readers and has reached the largest circulation of 530,000 copies each day in 34 provinces in Indonesia. During January-July 2016, only 196 key words of 'climate change' [appeared] in the columns of print of *Kompas* (<http://epaper.kompas.com/kompas/>). (Wahyuni, 2017)

As far as Indonesian education in science or environmental journalism is concerned, Hermin Indah Wahyuni also confirms that Indonesian journalism education is not giving enough emphasis to climate change issues. 'Journalism schools give much more attention to learn how to cover normal issues in economy, politics, and socio-cultural rather than environment or climate change. They still focus on learning "reporting the news" than "creating the issues". . . Meaning that they focus on reporting obvious facts—short term—and give little attention to potential—long term—issues' (Wahyuni, 2017).

### **Journalism education and climate change**

In-depth reporting of climate change and its impact is something that can be taught to journalists by journalism schools if they had enough trained faculty and resources in science journalism.

In the absence of formal training in science journalism in the schools, however, we have observed the phenomenon of non-formal or non-degree trainings on science journalism and climate change reporting conducted by international NGOs like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), US Agency for International Development (USAID), Japan International Cooperation Administration (JICA), and by national governments' Departments of Science and Technology and Departments of Environment and Natural Resources.

This might be a more practical way to go in terms of climate change journalists' training, if it takes too much time and resources to develop formal degree programs in communication and journalism schools.

I tried to get a sense of the state of science journalism education in the Asia-Pacific for this paper. We sent out a small one-page questionnaire to about 20 schools in the region. Probably because of limited time, among other reasons, only four responded. The impression we got: formal science and environmental education and training in the region is thin and too limited. For whatever it is worth we are reporting the results (Mini survey, 2016)

### **Asia-Pacific science journalism education survey**

1. Are Asian journalism schools giving enough emphasis to this issue (of climate change)? If no, why not? The replies:

- ✓ Lack of faculty.
- ✓ I am inclined to suspect that it is the issue of capacity.
- ✓ Lack of awareness about the need for such courses
- ✓ A lot of Asia-Pacific schools are aware that climate change is a very important issue. Some of them are trying to set the related courses.

2. Is enough attention being paid to the status of climate change refugees and the human rights issues involved in this problem?

- ✓ No. The link is even harder to make.
- ✓ We are aware of the issue of climate change refugees and as an academic institution we are following it.

3. In your opinion are the Asia-Pacific mass media (print, broadcast and social media) keeping up with science?

- ✓ Yes, the media do try. But this is not a particularly dramatic story to cover except when there are disasters.



4. What are the key challenges for journalism education and the best strategies in dealing with this issue?

- ✓ I think the continuing erosion of profits is making the news organisations use more freelancers or else free “citizen” content.
- ✓ This gives short shrift to training and education. It is a short-term gain—the tv show/newspaper comes out at lower cost.
- ✓ But this lowers the quality of the paper and turns off good people. The news organisations need to make it attractive for good people to join them.
- ✓ Students need more practice and professional experience. We should create more opportunities for students to practice.

5. Please mention some schools in your country/or in Asia-Pacific that you know are offering science journalism or environmental journalism.

- ✓ Beijing Normal University
- ✓ East China Normal University
- ✓ Huazhong University of Science and Technology
- ✓ University of the Philippines Los Banos, Laguna, Philippines

(Courses in Environmental Science and Graduate programme in Environmental Science)

- ✓ Silliman University, Dumaguete City, Philippines

(Certificate in Environmental Journalism and Silliman University environment news service or *SU Renews*, launched April 30, 2016)

### **Summary and conclusions**

Climate change is here as evidenced by the environmental disasters that are now regularly visiting our planet. The mass media are reporting these disasters religiously, and the journalists learn as they go along.

But the reporting has focused mainly on the toll in human lives and property. This is disaster reporting and it stops short of contextualizing. It does not adequately explain why the environmental disasters are happening more violently and more frequently.

Not too many reporters have taken formal courses in environmental journalism. Only a very few schools are offering regular courses, or programs in science and environmental reporting. The vacuum in formal science and environmental education is being filled by NGOs offering non-formal training.



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*Professor Crispin C. Maslog presented an earlier version of this article during a panel discussion on climate change and journalism education at the Fourth World Journalism Education Congress (WEC) conference on 14-16 July 2016 at Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Dr Maslog is a widely published Filipino writer, editor, and he has been a professor of communication for five decades. He is currently chair of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, the organisation he co-founded in 1970 under the auspices of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. He was brought to New Zealand by the Asia New Zealand Foundation in partnership with the Pacific Media Centre.*

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## Appendix

### Mini Survey on Asian Journalism Education on Climate Change

*Introduction. The world's scientists are now agreed that climate change is happening—in brief the earth is getting warmer; the storms are getting stronger and the seasons are changing.*

*The 2015 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of Parties (COP21) in Paris agreed in a declaration to mandate nations to lower their carbon footprints--to bring the global warming trend from 2 degrees Celsius to 1.5 degrees. This new protocol will succeed only if people prod their governments to take the mandate seriously.*

*This is where the role of journalists is crucial. We must educate people to the seriousness of the problem as a matter of human survival especially in the small island nations of the Pacific and South East Asia. Are the journalists in the region aware how critical the problem is? Are they being educated by the schools and training institutions in the area?*

*This is the rationale for this mini-survey. May we request you to kindly accomplish this brief survey at your earliest convenience? We hope to share the results with the coming World Journalism Education Conference in Auckland, New Zealand, July 12-16. We will quote you and give you due credit in our paper.*  
CRISPIN C. MASLOG, Science columnist, SciDev.Net

### QUESTIONNAIRE

**RESPONDENT No.** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Department/School/Country** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Is your department/school of journalism/communication offering courses on science journalism, environmental journalism, or related courses on climate change?

a. Yes \_\_\_\_\_

b. No \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please specify names/titles of courses \_\_\_\_\_

3. If not offering science or environmental journalism, what do you think are the reasons why?

a. Lack of faculty

b. lack of facilities

c. lack of funding

d. lack of awareness about the need for such courses

e. lack of interest by university/college administration

f. low priority in our academic program

g. others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. In your opinion, are Asia-Pacific schools giving enough importance to the issue of climate change?

Yes or no, please elaborate \_\_\_\_\_

5. Please mention some schools in your country/or in Asia-Pacific that you know are offering science journalism or environmental journalism.

\_\_\_\_\_

6. In your opinion are the Asia-Pacific mass media (print, broadcast and social media) keeping up with science?

Yes or no, please elaborate. \_\_\_\_\_

7. In your opinion, is enough attention being paid to the status of climate change refugees and the human rights issues involved in this problem?

Yes or no, please elaborate. \_\_\_\_\_

8. In your opinion, what are the key challenges for journalism education and the best strategies in dealing with this issue? \_\_\_\_\_

