



THE CLIMATE STORY: CONNECTING THE DOTS

WEBINAR SUMMARY
14 NOVEMBER 2023

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A summary from the webinar held on 14 November 2023

| INTRODUCTION

At the 'Climate Story: Connecting the Dots' web discussion, a mix of participants - journalists from Southeast Asia, climate advocates, communications and development professionals - exchanged insights about the overarching climate story that, in truth, supersedes all stories today. How to tell this story better, and the need for a Southeast Asian perspective in reporting the impacts and human toll of the climate crisis were the key threads that ran through this conversation.

The 14 November 2023 event was organized by the Reporting Asean series (with Probe Media Foundation Inc as host) in collaboration with the Heinrich Boell Foundation Southeast Asia Regional Office.

Two events in November provided a timely backdrop to this discussion of the need for a climate-proficient lens in the news - the 10th anniversary of Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful tropical cyclones ever recorded, and the start of the 28th meeting of parties to the UN Framework on Climate Change, the COP-28 in the United Arab Emirates. Haiyan ravaged parts of the Philippines in 14 November 2013, and COP-28 started on 28 November 2023.

Highlights from the discussion are found in the summary below. A recording of the event is [here](#).

| CONTEXT

The climate crisis is the largest, most important running story in the news today. Extreme heat and weather events, floods, droughts, disasters are some of the symptoms of a stressed planet that we are living through in Southeast Asia.

These are taking place at a time when the world is experiencing its hottest temperatures ever, and 2023 is shaping up to be the hottest year ever. Parts of Southeast Asia saw a blistering summer earlier in the year, when record-hot temperatures were reached in Vietnam and Laos.

These occurrences are now part of our life experience, but is the urgency and reality of the climate crisis and its impacts on our lives reflected in our news spaces? How are climate stories, ranging from those around disasters to social justice, being framed and reported in Southeast Asia?

These questions were the starting point of 'The Climate Story: Connecting the Dots' webinar. The event was aimed at providing a space for journalists and climate scientists and advocates from Southeast Asia to exchange insights on the regional angles of the climate crisis, reflect on how the climate story is being told and share practical ideas on how to do this better and in a more meaningful way in today's information venues.

The first part of the discussion, called 'Newsrooms and the Climate Story' in the format of a roundtable with journalists and editors, focused on the current news landscape around climate issues in the region.

This session focused on these questions: How do the media cover the climate story? What editorial investments have they made to better tell these stories? How can news professionals navigate the nuances around terms such as just energy transition, nature-based solutions, decarbonisation, climate justice, loss and damage?

In the second part of the event, 'Context Makes the Climate Story', two climate advocates from Southeast Asia spoke about connecting climate realities, facts and figures to public audiences, including through news.

The questions for this session included: What key issues around COP-28 and the climate should journalists track and watch out for, in order to explain better to their audiences? What competing issues do developing economies face in their climate commitments? What storytelling traps are there to be mindful of?

I HIGHLIGHTS

Climate and climate-related issues are everywhere around us, yet they are also not always seen in Southeast Asian media, reported on locally or consistently, put in context or connected to other current events and issues. This is the description of the news landscape around the climate story that emerged from the discussion, which began with the journalists' description of how their newsrooms work and what they see in Southeast Asian news spaces, and in the profession.

In fact, as in the case of one example shared during the webinar, it is not uncommon for a journalist to be reporting on a disaster and not be fully aware of, or ask questions, around the link to a changing climate, or go beyond what happened to ask 'what does this mean?'

News routines can make it a challenge to take a pause, step back and ask why or what something means. Often too, the news rhythm is about events, more than issues - or taking a critical look at a set of events over time.

Other observations included the view that there are many stories across Southeast Asia around, say, the environment, but these do not always explore or explain the ways that the climate crisis intersects with real-life issues such as health, the rising toll of disasters, politics and governance, economies, culture, consumer habits and lifestyles. In the region, climate has often ranked lower as an issue in election campaigns, yet our countries are very vulnerable to disasters and face various challenges in response and resilience, among others.

Among the challenges to reporting climate from a wider perspective is the lack of training and editorial policy on climate storytelling in newsrooms, restrictions from the usual beat system in news, a tendency to focus more on 'negative' stories rather than on solutions or attempts at solutions in climate challenges, lack of climate journalism resources relevant to developing-country contexts and a degree of unfamiliarity, skill and lack of investment in data literacy for news work. Emphasis was also given on the need for individual journalists to do their homework — and brush up on climate-related issues, whether or not they are assigned such a story or whatever their news beat is.

Apart from the typical confinement of climate within the topic of ‘environment’, reports on global trends in climate are often left to the foreign news section - which can help local and regional audiences feel more distant to these, almost as if the climate emergency is something that is happening far away, on the other side of the world.

Some realities around the global news imbalance also emerged. For instance, fires in the Western hemisphere can get much more news coverage than those, say, in Southeast Asia, when their impact is also huge - and also releases massive amounts of carbon into the atmosphere. When it comes to record heat, Southeast Asia had its share of highest temperatures in the summer too.

Then, there are some questions that stand out but are not being asked in the news. For example, the Philippines consistently ranks as among the most vulnerable countries to disasters, but it does not have a net-zero target. Moreover, the results of the 2023 Southeast Asia Climate Outlook show that Filipinos made up the highest proportion of survey respondents who did not have the correct information about their country’s climate policy. Do news stories routinely point out that the Philippines is among two Asean countries (the other being Myanmar) that do not have a net-zero target?

In sharing their insights, the climate advocates spoke about the angles around the climate emergency and COP-28 that are relevant for journalists to understand. Understanding, after all, is the journalists’ starting point for asking critical questions to frame their story ideas. They translate global concepts, big words and terms, into daily stories - and for this, a level of proficiency in the climate conversation is indispensable.

Localisation to tell a regional or global issue around climate makes a big difference, and at times the skillful and science-based use of social media platforms - or spaces outside traditional news - can be innovative and reach more users. This can bring an issue closer to what audiences can see, feel, touch, and even take action on. How then, can the media and others storytellers capture the attention and imagination of the average person in Southeast Asia?

Among the issues that Southeast Asian journalists need to follow are why a ‘just transition’ and the matter of loss and damage are crucial for developing countries, an awareness that slogans and catch phrases like ‘green transition’ can mean something completely different, and the skill to make - and make evident - connections between the climate crisis and the changes it is bringing to the way we live.

After making a description of the news environment about the climate crisis in Southeast Asia - and then connecting these to what journalists need to use the climate lens for - several participants expressed agreement with the insight that the climate needs to be much higher - and much more evident - in the news agenda of Southeast Asia.

Discussions touched on ideas such as the development of tools that newsrooms can find useful, newsroom collaboration, and hands-on opportunities for training on the climate story - one that, after all, relates to the continued existence of the human species on the planet it shares with other living beings.

Below is a set of tips from Reporting Asean around rethinking the climate story, which helped round off the web discussion:

- Keep up with climate issues – it’s our job.
- Free the climate story from the boundaries of ‘environment’, ‘science’ (and your own barriers)
- Data are our friends. Unpack big terms, and make the planetary personal too.
- Stay curious.

| SOME RELATED MATERIAL

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<http://racingthekingtide.com/>

<https://www.reportingasean.net/news-tool-reporting-on-a-stressed-planet-16-concepts/>

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/southeast-asia-climate-outlook/southeast-asia-climate-outlook-2023-survey-report/>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/9/20/journalism-cant-leave-the-climate-crisis-to-netflix-and-billie-eilish>

<https://th.boell.org/en/2023/07/24/rhetoric-reality-jetp-asean>

<https://th.boell.org/en/2022/12/19/loss-and-damage-perspectives-southeast-asia>
