



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Lessons in environmental news reporting from Brazil

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September 2021

Michaelmas Term

Sponsor: Anglo American

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Acknowledgements

This paper was made possible by the generous sponsorship of Anglo American. Thank you for supporting journalists.

I am also grateful for the generosity of Leão Serva, director of Journalism at TV Cultura, who let me leave the newsroom to take part in the Reuters Institute Journalism Fellowship, and my editor-in-chief Carlos Taquari.

All my gratitude to the Reuters Institute director Rasmus Nielsen and deputy director Meera Selva for making this dream come true and all the staff working really hard to make this fellowship possible, especially Caithlin Mercer and Philippa Garson.

My gratitude to the interviewees.

Thank you to all the fellows who have lived this unique experience with me and made my world more colourful. People like you make me truly believe that we can make this planet a better place to live.

My gratitude for my mother, Glaucia Santelli, for all the unconditional love and support. You are truly part of this.

Of course, a big thank you to all my family and friends in Brazil. It would not have been possible to do this work and the fellowship without all your video calls, messages, incentive and kind words. And to all my friends in the UK, thank you for the hospitality and support.

Introduction

In February 2021, secretary-general of the United Nations António Guterres said climate disruption, pollution, and accelerated loss of biodiversity were the critical elements that make up what he called the “defining issue of our time”.

Communicating this challenge, and generating public engagement, is undoubtedly the most important role of journalism in the 21st century.

Environmental journalism has always been on the news agenda in Brazil, home of the Amazon rainforest, Pantanal wetlands, and all of their associated unique flora and fauna. In recent years, due to the destructive and anti-scientific policies of the current administration, it has become a dominant theme.

How do newsrooms in Brazil cover these complex issues in a way that interests and mobilises audiences? To answer that question, I interviewed eight leading reporters from Brazil's mainstream media, across television, print, and digital:

- Ana Carolina Amaral, environment reporter at *Folha de São Paulo*
- Ana Lúcia Azevedo, science and environment reporter at O Globo
- André Trigueiro, special reporter and presenter at TV Globo, columnist at Rádio CBN
- Cláudia Gaigher, environment reporter at TV Globo
- Cláudia Tavares, environment reporter at TV Cultura
- Daniela Chiaretti, environment reporter at *Valor Econômico*
- Giovana Girardi, former environment reporter at *O Estado de S. Paulo*
- Sônia Bridi, special reporter at TV Globo.

I also engaged in discussions with journalists from around the world at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, including Wolfgang Blau, a visiting fellow and former COO at Condé Nast.

I have organised their responses to explain the evolution of the environmental news beat, why journalists in Brazil have found themselves at the frontline of innovating in this field, new tactics for reporting these stories, and advice for newsroom managers and all journalists – regardless of your beat – on how to tell this most urgent story.

The evolution of environmental journalism

Environmental journalism is not a new field – not in Brazil, or anywhere else. For many years it was on the news agenda as the beat that brought us beautiful stories about nature – usually with happy endings. It was a great way to round out the day’s bulletin and relieve the public from the stress of the daily news cycle.

In the 1980s and ’90s, as alarm bells about CO² began ringing more loudly at the United Nations, the news stories became more regular and far less “cute”: species under threat of extinction, disappearing habitats, chemical pollution, holes in the ozone layer, and a growing interest in the work of scientists like Wallace Broecker.¹ In 1988, based on these concerns, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was founded.

In the last decade, the field of environmental journalism has evolved to require coverage of the politics, tragedies and extensive scientific work around climate emergencies, accelerated loss of habitats and dwindling biodiversity.

“Today, no one doubts that the environment is the biggest breaking news or developing story happening on the planet,” said TV Globo’s special reporter, Sonia Bridi. “[It is a story that] will profoundly change our relationship with energy, with food, with consumption... with everything.”

How the environmental news beat evolved and grew is partly a reflection of an evolving public agenda: not so much a top-down prescription of what is in the public interest, but – in a world fully connected by the internet – a bottom-up demand that we pay attention to what is happening on the ground.^{2,3}

¹ Wallace Broecker coined the term “global warming” in 1975. See the BBC’s *Brief History of Climate Change* at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-15874560>

² Sarah B. Pralle (2009) Agenda-setting and climate change, *Environmental Politics*, 18:5, 781-799, DOI: 10.1080/09644010903157115

³ Ana S Cardenal, Carol Galais, Silvia Majó-Vázquez, Is Facebook Eroding the Public Agenda? Evidence From Survey and Web-Tracking Data, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Volume 31, Issue 4, Winter 2019, Pages 589–608, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edy025>

“One of the strongest lobbies in Brazil is the animal defence lobby,” André Trigueiro, special reporter for the environment and presenter at TV Globo and columnist at Rádio CBN told me. “It comes from the bottom up. The pressure from society mobilises the congress, which accelerates the process towards, for example, legislation that prohibits the use of animals in laboratory tests for cosmetics. [It] is a civilizing achievement.”

The 2019 Brazilian Survey on Public Perception of Science and Technology found the topic of “environment” ranked second in perception of social relevance, following “health and medicine”. Deforestation in the Amazon leads as a matter of biggest concern among those interviewed. The poll also revealed that 38% of the public cite “journalists” as their first or second most trusted source when obtaining science and technology information.⁴

Another survey carried out in 2020 and launched in early 2021 pointed to environmental protection as a priority for 86% of the people consulted. According to data from the joint study by the Institute of Technology and Society (ITS) and the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 61% of Brazilians said they were “*muito preocupado*” (very concerned) about the environment, and another 25% worried.⁵

“Environmental journalism has lost a bit of its innocence in the last two years in Brazil,” said Giovana Girardi, former environmental reporter at *O Estado de S. Paulo*. “It’s not only about cute animals anymore; everything has gained a different proportion.”

In a country where television is the primary source of information, the big media houses carry the greatest responsibility to inform. Across the country, journalists are facing the challenge of telling stories that cannot be left in the “and finally” segment.

Media researchers note that environmental journalists must also find ways to capture and maintain public attention and action for a story that is both long and complex – the consequences of which are evolving slowly, and often far away. They must grapple with

⁴ Cgee.org.br. 2020. Public perception of S&T in Brazil - 2019. [online] Available at: <https://www.cgee.org.br/documents/10195/734063/CGEE_resumoexecutivo_Percepcao_pub_CT.pdf>

⁵ En.percepcaoclimatica.com.br. 2021. Climate Change and Public Perception in Brazil. [online] Available at: <<https://en.percepcaoclimatica.com.br/>> [Accessed 1 September 2021].

climate science, but must also understand the philosophical and ethical implications of communicating with a world facing severe crises.⁶

For Claudia Tavares, the ethical and philosophical basis for her journalism is that “other beings have the right to exist”. “That has to be in our minds when we do an environmental story,” she said. “I’ve noticed a change over time, in the sense of [environmental journalists in Brazil] having a deeper understanding of these issues and a greater understanding of the whole.”

⁶ Ilza M. T. Girardi, E., 2021. Caminhos e Descaminhos do Jornalismo Ambiental. [online] Available at: <<http://www.bibliotekevirtual.org/index.php/2013-02-07-03-02-35/2013-02-07-03-03-11/546-cso/v34n01/5144-caminhos-e-descaminhos-do-jornalismo-ambiental.html>>

Understanding the Brazilian context

Brazil is home to 60% of the world's largest tropical forest. Responsible for soaking up and storing more carbon than any other form of terrestrial vegetation, the Amazon rainforest was once regarded as the world's "CO² sink". It is also home to the world's largest wetland, the Pantanal, home to 20% of the world's species – with many still unidentified. It has more than 8,000 kilometres of oceanic coastline.



The Amazon rainforest, Maró Indigenous Land. Photo supplied by Flavio Forner

The government of Jair Messias Bolsonaro has been deliberately dismantling environmental policies designed to protect these resources over decades at an unprecedented rate. This path of destruction benefits parts of the private sector – particularly the unsustainable agribusiness – but it is disconnected from the current global demands for collective environmental action.

The new policies have resulted in a dismantling of protective laws, resolutions and instructions, as well as the weakening of environmental agencies, and the discrediting of journalists and scientists. According to satellite monitoring by the Institute for Space Research (INPE), after Bolsonaro came to power, deforestation in the Amazon increased by almost 10% in the year following August 2019 compared to the previous period.⁷



Deforestation through slash and burn to make way for commercial farming.

Photo supplied by Bruno Kelly/Amazônia Real

Environmental news impacts every beat

Newsrooms that previously thought little about environmental journalistic coverage have been forced to pay attention, and reporters have been left to reckon with environmental stories involving social, economic and political implications. Environmental issues have found their way into the crime beat. One news story focused on the Federal Police's

⁷ BBC News, 30 November 2020. *Brazil's Amazon: Deforestation 'surges to 12-year high'* Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-55130304>

investigation into former Brazilian Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles, implicated as a facilitator in illegal logging and export schemes.⁸

"Police and the Environment, which once seemed like separate subjects, became the same theme," said Globo's Bridi. "Attacks on the environment in Brazil have been carried out by organised crime groups that move millions of reais and have support at the highest level. And there is a government that encourages the practice of these crimes."

Daniela Chiaretti, environment reporter at Valor, said she had also seen a huge difference in covering Bolsonaro's agenda compared to other governments. "In previous governments there were project agendas, strong discussions on important infrastructure issues. [...] Today is a dismantling. The government has little transparency, talks to few press agencies, operates in the same way Trump's government operated. So now we see deforestation on the rise, the government weakening institutions like INPE, IBAMA, and a lack of budget... We are talking about depressing coverage, I would say."

This challenging scenario is accompanied by sustained, direct attacks on press professionals and freedom of expression.⁹

"Today, talking about the environment means bothering those in power, more than at other times," said Trigueiro. For him, the moment calls for resistance: journalists must both demand and provide detailed justifications and evidence for the facts, must use public data, and must present the scientific evidence to combat the government's tendency to negate stories that interfere with their agenda of disassembly.

This does mean that environmental stories have gained a new significance in the news media.

⁸ Maria Marcello and Jake Spring, Reuters, 24 June 2021. *Brazil environment minister quits; faces illegal logging probe*. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazil-environment-minister-salles-resigns-amid-illegal-logging-probe-2021-06-23/>

⁹ Reporters Without Borders, 20 January 2021. *RSF tallied 580 attacks against media in Brazil in 2020*. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/reports/rsf-tallied-580-attacks-against-media-brazil-2020>

“The space made available [by editors] for environmental stories in the media has increased,” said Trigueiro. “The reverberation of [Bolsonaro’s policies] has begun to interest audiences who were not so interested before.” Take, for example, the appearance of environmental news in the Finance section. There has been extensive coverage of the risk of the failure of the agreement between South American trade bloc MERCOSUR and the European Union, with some of the country’s most prominent investors calling for a clear recommitment by Brazil to the environment and the rights of indigenous populations at risk of losing significant resources.

Ana Carolina Amaral, environment reporter at *Folha de S. Paulo*, said: “Bolsonaro raised the environmental issue to a level of international political and economic crisis.” Environmental coverage under the Bolsonaro government, she said, needs to paint a picture for audiences of how boring policy issues will affect the very fabric of society if ignored.

New skills and independent outlets

The story is so big, and so important, that journalists have specialised in new skills – such as satellite monitoring, data collection and analysis – and have set up independent outlets devoted to in-depth investigative work on the issue. Most notable among these players: *Infoamazônia*, *Amazônia Real*, *Ambiental Media*, *Repórter Brasil*, *De Olho nos Ruralistas*, *O Joio e o Trigo* and *A Pública*.

Cláudia Tavares, environment reporter at TV Cultura, said: “[Independent] investigative journalism is essential today. It shakes structures because it is not tied to the capitalist logic of time [spent] that we usually have in the big media. I think big media in Brazil should work harder to produce stories with the same level of importance and repercussion that the independent media is doing.”

TV Globo’s Bridi believes partnering with independent outlets is important. “On the one hand, they can carry out investigations with reporters on the ground, on the other hand

the mainstream media can add visibility to their work,” she said. “At the same time, we can carry out a parallel investigation that complements the story.”

Striking a new tone

Daniela Chiaretti is environment reporter at the most prominent financial newspaper in Brazil, *Valor Econômico*. For her, the best strategy for reporting on the environment in 2021 is to bring some hope to readers. That hope right now, she said, is in reporting on important discussions that are happening abroad. She believes that telling stories that show good practices or solutions can help audiences understand there are other options. “To give people a breath, to inspire the audience, I try to write a lot about what happens outside Brazil. Brazil is now clearly not just facing a setback, but missing the [boat] entirely. I find this unbearable and I think my role is to bring discussions that are happening outside Brazil.”

Cláudia Tavares, environment reporter at TV Cultura, has a similar approach. A good way to report on devastation is to focus on how people are resisting and surviving, she said. “I always believed in beauty and positive role models to attract people's attention. Nevertheless, unfortunately, it is getting more and more difficult to do that. At this moment in Brazil, it is complicated.”

Bolsonaro's government has helped create a seismic shift in the field of environmental journalism. They have demonstrated what happens when this beat is ignored, brought renewed attention and a sense of urgency, and inspired in journalists new methods for communicating the problems.

The new fundamentals of environmental journalism

In August 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest report on the state of the climate crisis, the [Sixth Assessment Report Climate Change 2021](#), AR6. It analysed 14,000 pieces of scientific literature – the most comprehensive assessment on the topic in the world.

The conclusion: overall global temperatures are up 1.1°C since the pre-industrial revolution. It means our goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C by 2050, as set in the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015, is no longer achievable. Instead, the report predicts an increase of 1.5°C will be reached much sooner, probably by the mid-2030s.

Although the current data shows we are near an irreversible status for some issues related to the environment, there is still time to change and reduce human impacts.

A crisis of this scale requires a shift in mindset. Beyond the practical systematic advice offered to journalists and editors in the next two chapters, three fundamental changes require our attention: who should tell this story, what should they be expected to know in order to tell the story accurately, and how should the story be told?

Who tells it: every story is a climate story now

When the *New York Times* announced the end of its environmental desk in 2013, there was apprehension: was the newspaper signalling that environmental coverage was moving down the agenda, or was it showing it understood that the environment should permeate all editorial coverage? According to editor Dean Baquet, it was the latter. Environmental coverage could no longer be considered an isolated issue. The *Financial Times* took the opposite approach when it launched a new digital hub for climate news earlier this year in response to public requests for one.

While specialist desks can continue to exist, breaking away from the idea that a single desk or agenda is responsible for environmental news is crucial. Environmental coverage cannot be the exclusive purview of one group in a newsroom; it must be on every journalist, editor and media owner's radar. This will require training.

Wolfgang Blau, former COO at Condé Nast International and a visiting fellow at the Reuters Institute, spent much of 2020 surveying media organisations around the world to understand newsroom perspectives on climate news coverage. The climate crisis necessitates a new breed of journalist, he said.

“We need journalists who are systemic thinkers, understand how large-scale transformations work, what the obstacles are, what the methods are,” he said. “We need journalists who understand policies, which is not the same as politics. We'll find many journalists who are really good at covering elections. We'll find fewer journalists who understand how policies are being made and implemented.”

All of this in one person may be a tall order, but educating journalists across the board so that they can work together is not. “No topic is exempt from the effects of the climate crisis. There is just no area of society or area of journalism that would not already see changes that have to do with the climate crisis,” he said.

While he doesn't argue against having an environment desk or a climate beat, he said it essential not to keep the topic confined to one or two employees in the newsroom. It may be necessary to start with a dedicated role as a “driver of change”, but it should gradually be incorporated into the other desks.

By working together, different news sections will help to illustrate the interrelatedness of environmental consequences and provide a holistic outlook. Well-rounded and pervasive coverage does not happen by accident: it must be consciously planned with a commitment to continuity. This is why responsibility for environmental news falls not just to all journalists, but to all editors, managers and directors, too.

Valor's Chiaretti said environment desks should also be doggedly "local" in their approach to who sets the agenda. "I don't like the manipulated agenda that comes from northern countries for us. We need a look from the global south, to our own problems, which are much more similar to Latin America and Africa than to the UK, for instance. There's been a lot of manipulation of the climate agenda by some news organisations. Climate journalism in European countries is not similar to our climate journalism. In Europe there is no discussion of inequality, of other social aspects, or climate injustices that are part of our reality. We can't just have the European vision. As journalists we can't simply translate what happens there," she said.

Girardi agreed, adding: "It is necessary to search for local stories that exemplify climate change [...] a person, a place, that shows a consequence and how people are dealing with the situation."

What is required: scientific literacy

As we've said repeatedly now, journalistic coverage of the climate crisis is no longer the sole responsibility of environmental reporters. It pervades every beat, and every journalist should have some basic grasp of the science to ensure we tell the story accurately – whether on the breaking news pages or finance pages.

This permeation of environmental science knowledge must happen at all levels – from editor-in-chief to cub reporter – to ensure the interconnected nature of this crisis translates into complementary coverage across sections.

"It is a field that needs to mature and be seen with maturity by managers and media executives," said Ana Lucia Azevedo, special reporter on Science and Environment at O Globo.

Workshops, online seminars and lectures on the subject are widely available, and newsroom managers should mandate this training. Of course, this doesn't mean it isn't still worth having a specialist on staff. If you do, ensure that the newsroom makes good use of their talents. Chiaretti helps her colleagues at *Valor* by collaborating on stories,

consulting in planning meetings, and reading through their articles to provide expert overview. “I do it with great pleasure,” she said.

Where budget constraints prevent hiring a specialist like Chiaretti, and don’t allow the time for in-depth data and investigative journalism these stories sometimes require, consider partnerships or joint productions with small independent newsrooms specialising in this content, like InfoAmazonia. You could either republish their content, or set up collaborative projects.

A lack of understanding of the complexity of these stories can lead to oversimplification and overemphasis on the wrong things. For example, we frequently see coverage about individual lifestyle changes we should make to address the crisis. This obfuscates the real game-changer: policies that hold the 1% to account. As the Climate Accountability Institute puts it: just 20 companies are responsible for 35% of all energy-related carbon dioxide and methane worldwide.¹⁰

How to tell it: solutions journalism

In the previous chapter, both Valor’s Chiaretti and TV Cultura’s Tavares alluded to a style of journalism that has been providing good results worldwide: solutions journalism.¹¹ Far from focusing on positive stories that obscure the facts, solutions journalism aims to holistically cover how people are responding to problems.

It may have important applications for environmental journalists. “We can’t have a negativist agenda and only talk about what doesn’t work because then journalism doesn’t fully fulfil its social function,” said broadcaster and columnist Trigueiro. “We need to show what doesn’t work, but the balance of journalistic coverage presupposes [giving]

¹⁰ Taylor, M. and Watts, J., 2019. Revealed: the 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/09/revealed-20-firms-third-carbon-emissions>> [Accessed 10 September 2021].

¹¹ Lake, R., n.d. Constructive News: Can Solutions Journalism Save Our Forests? | PAGE. [online] Un-page.org. Available at: <<https://www.un-page.org/constructive-news-can-solutions-journalism-save-our-forests>> [Accessed 9 September 2021].

perspectives. We need to be a showcase for solutions to inspire people. Bringing solutions helps to increase the audience.”

The solutions journalism concept is still largely misunderstood among journalists in Brazil, even among the top journalists I interviewed for this paper. Experts at the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) define the practice as a story that:

- Can be character-driven, but focuses in-depth on a response to a problem, and how the response works in meaningful detail
- Focuses on effectiveness, not good intentions, presenting available evidence of results
- Discusses the limitations of the approach
- Seeks to provide insights that others can use
- Addresses the limitations, uncertainties and costs of the response

It is not a technique that puts journalists in the position of telling society what is right or wrong. Instead, it provides information about alternative approaches to societal problems based on initiatives that can show their results.

Experts argue that solution journalism stories are deeper and more comprehensive than those that merely highlight the problem.¹² They also create a connection with communities, and stimulate feelings of hope.

In the words of TV Globo’s Bridi: “We must write about the dangers, but if we don’t help people to find a solution, a path to know how they can engage in a positive way, we only sow despair and despair leads to denial.”

¹² Oliver, L., 2021. What solutions journalism can bring to the news media in the Global South. [online] Available at: <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/what-solutions-journalism-can-bring-news-media-global-south>> [Accessed 9 September 2021].

Other tactics for editors to improve their environmental coverage

During discussions with environmental journalists from the Brazilian mainstream media and in-depth discussions with journalists from other countries during my fellowship, certain themes kept cropping up.

The following two chapters aim to summarise these. I do not anticipate that all of the advice will be suitable for every newsroom, but I hope it inspires an evaluation of your own systems.

Hire staff from diverse backgrounds

Environmental and climate issues impact every demographic and are strongly related to inequality, poverty, gender and race. The coming environmental catastrophes will disproportionately affect minority and marginalised groups. To tell these stories accurately and in an accessible way for all, you should give space to a diverse range of voices from across the socio-economic spheres, and be mindful of missing minority viewpoints. That doesn't mean just reporting on the communities, but having them work in your newsroom to help shape the agenda.

Be open to new formats

TV Cultura's Tavares said: "On TV, there is a strongly established formula for reporting that is difficult to break. A certain structure that doesn't change over time. But the journalist should be less concerned with the structure and more with how to translate his experience, and how to transport the public to the place he is reporting from."

Seek collaborations and partnerships

"Newsrooms are so small nowadays," said Girardi. "Why not team up with journalists [from independent outlets] who specialise in data or investigative journalism on the big stories? The independent media would also benefit from it. Media consortia is also a good

idea: when several newsrooms come together. Brazil is a huge country. Lots of environmental problems happen in inaccessible areas, so having partnerships with local professionals – not only sporadic freelancers, but actual partnerships with local newsrooms can help a lot.”

A picture is (still) worth a thousand words

The largest tropical wetland on the planet, the Pantanal, suffered one of the biggest fires in its history in 2020. The fire devastated almost 30% of the biome. Public attention and political will was most effectively drawn to this disaster by a steady supply of images chronicling the destruction, which were published and broadcast widely and repeatedly by Brazilian media.



An image of a Yacare Caiman killed by fires in the Pantanal. Photo supplied by Edson Vandeira

“Stories that can be told with images are much better engraved in the imagination of the public,” said *Folha*’s Amaral. “It is a form of documentation that [leaves] no doubts. It has a much higher power than the text.”

Train, train, train

Ensure that staff across the newsroom receive regular training and workshops about the issues. “We do not all need to become science journalists,” said Valor’s Chiaretti. “Some journalists specialise more than others. But it does not prevent journalists from other areas from learning about this topic.”

Go deeper

Telling the story of the unfolding environmental crises is not just one story, but a series of consistent follow-ups that build depth and communicate complexity. “I often notice superficiality in environmental news,” said TV Globo’s Gaigher. “I think environmental journalism has to be based on a triage that includes enchantment, science and deepening the topic. Deepening a story is only possible through continuity.”

Girardi, former environment reporter at O Estado de S. Paulo, added: “Continuity has to be done carefully, with a concern about how you’re going to continue to attract the audience. It’s not enough to talk about the same subject; there is a need to attract people in a different way. Look for new approaches.”

Incorporate investigative journalism and data journalism

The environmental news agenda cannot stick to shallow stories. It must aggressively point the finger at responsible sectors, politicians or other actors who finance or take part in environmental crimes. Investigations that bring evidence of these crimes to light are vital.

Other tactics for journalists to improve their environmental coverage

Not every journalist in the world will be lucky enough to work in a country where the environment is on every news outlet's agenda. If you are a journalist working for an organisation that has yet to grasp the magnitude of environment issues in 2021, do not be defeated. There are still actions you can take to improve your own coverage.

Choose your words wisely

"I'm not a fan of sarcasm and cynicism in texts," said Chiaretti. "Because if you do that, you diminish the reader, who may be in doubt, be curious, trying to find out more about that topic... One thing I've been doing – in addition to thinking a lot about headlines – is to avoid adjectives and adverbs. I don't qualify. I try to give the facts the best I can at the moment."

When dealing with scientific pieces and specific expressions, ask an expert to check your work when possible and be eager to issue public corrections. In times when science is being attacked and scientific information is so crucial, a small mistake can have unfortunate ramifications for misinformation.

Consider the implicit messages of everyday words, too. These can reinforce negative patterns or spread misinformation. Cláudia Tavares gave the example of saying "natural elements" instead of "natural resources". "Resources convey the idea that something is always there for humanity to use," she said.

Use a wide range of voices in every story

We talk about the importance of consulting good scientific resources for environmental journalism: listening to researchers, and so on. But don't stop there. A compelling story captures as many sides of the story as possible. Think about a fisherman directly affected

by an oil spill, or an indigenous leader that has lots of traditional knowledge about the forest that is being destroyed.

“You have to open up your mind. Knowledge doesn't just come from scientists,” said TV Globo’s Gaigher. “Traditional knowledge is critical. Have humility and respect for indigenous peoples and other traditional communities. After all, they got here long before us.”

Valor’s Chiaretti added: “I like to bring the voices of people who usually are not heard to a newspaper like *Valor* – that is, a newspaper read by people who have decision-making power.” A diversity of voices can be the high-point of a story.

Make the problems tangible and create connections

You’ve read the reports and papers, interviewed scientists and grappled with the data. Now how do you convey the facts to your audience?

1. Make it tangible by offering real-life examples.
2. Use comparisons and examples as close as possible to people's lives and basic knowledge.
3. Transform abstract numbers into something people usually have already heard about and can easily imagine.
4. Be creative when choosing comparisons.
5. Make use of widely disseminated information.

“In April this year, we had the highest deforestation rate in the history of the Deter-Prodes system: 518km². For those who live in cities – more than 85% of the population in Brazil – that number doesn't mean anything,” said Trigueiro. “But then I explained that this equates to approximately 32 million trees. It may seem like a silly tactic, but it makes the problem tangible. That's the challenge when doing environmental journalism.”

Simplification requires mastery

TV Globo's Gaigher issues this stark warning: "If we do not seek correct information, if we are not prepared to understand complexities, if we don't search in the right place, at some point, we will talk nonsense. We will say something shallow. At some point, we will miss a great opportunity to use the space that we have on TV, radio, or print and will speak the trivial and not the essential."

No journalist is omniscient, but there are two tactics to take to be better prepared for reporting complex issues. One: become a lifelong student, always seeking a deeper understanding of the science, economics, sociology and politics of the world we live in. Two: surround yourself with a network of specialists that you can consult, and train yourself to say: "I don't know, but I know who we should ask". "You need to dive deep into understanding and then come back to the surface to hear your audience," said Amaral.

If you can, specialise: choose an area you're interested in – for example, deforestation. Read as much as you can and keep up-to-date with new developments. Get to know the relevant institutions, researchers and NGOs in your field. Set up Google Scholar alerts for the latest scientific research and reports.

"It's a very technical area. An extremely transversal theme. There needs to be an understanding in the market that specialization is necessary," said Azevedo.

Once you're confident, let your colleagues know that you are willing to provide support by sharing that knowledge.

Report from the ground

To cover the environment, journalists need to go to places, talk to local people, feel the nuances, and the climate of facts that compound the story. "Google is not going to solve everything," said O Globo's Azevedo. "It's just a tool. It is impossible to capture the climate of a deforested area or the subtlety of the forest via the internet. You need to see things from the ground. Enjoy the bush and the mud."

Remember: you are not an activist

If you feel passionate about the environment, it can be easy to fall into the role of an activist. “The problem I see in some environmental journalists is that they end up slipping into militancy, and the work is not about militancy,” said Azevedo from O Globo. “You can’t take sides, otherwise some people will never listen to you.”

“Of course I’m not talking about the coverage of the current government, which is not normal,” she added. Many of my interviewees cautioned about reporting on Bolsonaro.

Extremist voices do not need to be platformed for your work to be impartial, lies do not need to be reported – certainly not without calling them lies. It only means you should stay open to listening to different people, understanding their viewpoints, and reporting fairly. Work with the head and leave the heart to the second place.

Think far beyond ESG criteria

Don’t reduce the environmental beat to endless stories about corporations and their latest green efforts. Yes, it is important to recognise good practices by the private sector, but not at the expense of other important stories about biodiversity loss, climate change, ocean plastic pollution and the impacts of these crises on people’s lives. Beware of falling into the “green wash” public relations cycle.

Remind your audience why it matters

“Creating a bond is making people aware of the object of the story,” said TV Globo’s Sônia Bridi. “Whether it is a tree, an animal, or a family, people need to know it first, develop a connection and then understand that it is in danger. Only then will they care. It’s impossible to take care of something you don’t love. It’s impossible to love something you don’t know. Knowledge is what establishes bonds of affection. When you understand, you start appreciating and protecting it”.

Conclusion

In Brazil, Bolsonaro's anti-environment policies are making it easier for illegal loggers and miners, land grabbers, and non-sustainable farmers to put indigenous tribes and ecosystems in danger. Reporting on this has become all the more difficult because of the government's constant efforts to discredit the media, promote disinformation and deny science. According to Reporters without Borders, there were almost 600 attacks on the Brazilian press in 2020.

In the face of all this, journalists across Brazil – including the environmental journalists I spoke to for this paper – continue to do their work to provide fact-checked and high-quality information to audiences.

I hope their bravery and insights inspire you – whether you are a newsroom manager or just starting out in the field – to take time to think about how you plan to cover environmental news in the years to come.

The crises we face will require more than individual efforts: system changes, collaboration and new approaches will all be necessary.

In 1939, a wartime propaganda poster exhorted the British to “keep calm and carry on”. If I were to issue a similar sentiment to journalists and editors around the world in 2021, it would be to keep calm, but don't carry on as usual. Instead, review your resources and systems – from newsroom values and systems, to staffing, budgets and partnerships. Environmental issues should be woven throughout your plans in a way that ensures journalists will receive the training and support they need to cover the biggest story of our lifetime.