

(New) Ecological Problems: Post-pandemic Climate Change Remains an Oceania Existential Threat

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Abstract

Environmental damage, climate change, and increasingly intense natural disasters are serious problems faced by humanity in this millennium. More ecological damage occurs due to expensive and destructive human activities. Illegal logging, expansion of mining areas, pollution of water sources, overfishing, trade-in protected wildlife continue to happen, and the scale is even greater. Meanwhile, climate change is increasingly visible and impacting communities in urban to rural areas. Coastal cities in the United States to coastal villages in the north of Java and the microstates of the South Pacific facing the real impact of sea-level rise. Disasters that occur bring not only material losses but also socio-economic consequences for people affected. The emergence of new ecological problems is being faced by humanity. The complexity of ecological problems is nonlinear, turbulent, and dynamic. This was the theme of the panel (New) Ecological Problems: Defining the Relationship between Humans and the Environment at the Symposium on Social Science 2020. This paper, part of the SOSS 2020 panel on ecological problems, argues for countries to overhaul and "reset" their public health and economic systems to ones based on strengthening multilateral institutions and collaboration, and to abandon or seriously curtail neoliberalism models that have failed. It also argues that the profession of journalism also needs to approach climate change strategies with as much urgency as for addressing the global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. The current crisis is a precursor to further crises unless the globe changes its ways to heal both people and the planet.

Keywords: Climate Change; Communication; COVID-19; Environmental Damage; Pacific Islands

Introduction

As the Symposium on Social Science 2020¹ keynote speaker, Professor Kishore Mahbubani, expressed in his stimulating and challenging opening address, the world has fundamentally changed as a result of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. The question is whether it has changed for the better or worse. Hopefully, we are witnessing the end of neoliberalism as an

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¹ The Symposium on Social Science (SOSS) is a biennial international event hosted by the Center for Southeast Asian Social Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 24-25 August 2020.

economic recipe for the globe and we will be embarking on a new pathway based on social justice and collaboration rather than a system based on growing inequality while the one-percenter get richer and the rest of us struggle. Mahbubani also heralded the rise of Asian economies and ideas in a post-COVID world.

“A shift of power to Asia [is taking place] and the 21st century will be the Century of Asia. We need to be very clear about that. There is absolutely no doubt... It is only in the last 200 years that Europe and North America have taken over. So the last 200 years of Western dominance of world history has been an aberration. All aberrations come to a natural end. So it is only natural to see the return of Asia.” (*Pacific Media Watch*, 2020).

If nothing else, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized for us the importance of acting collectively and cooperatively for the planet. However, not just for our wellbeing, but also for the health of the planet with a greater sense of urgency.

The coronavirus pandemic has been widely described as a “once in a century catastrophe”, but many scientists say that this is a naïve way of looking at the crisis. According to a major study by 17 scientists on ecology and economics for pandemic prevention recently published in *Science* journal (Dobson et al., 2020), two new zoonotic viruses a year have spilled from their wildlife hosts into humans over the past century.

These scientists argue that it is essential to crack down on the international wildlife trade and the razing of forests. Both bring wildlife into contact with people and their livestock. However, they also say that such efforts are severely underfunded, and by spending a mere US\$260 billion over a decade—which represents just 2 percent of the estimated US\$11.5 trillion costs of the COVID-19 pandemic to the world economy. The scientists call for better regulation of the wildlife trade, disease surveillance, as well as control in wild and domestic animals; ending the wild meat trade in China and cutting deforestation by 40 percent in key places. There is a clear link between deforestation and the emergence of viruses. Tropical forest edges create a “major launchpad” for new viruses infecting humans (Carrington, 2020; Dobson et al., 2020).

On top of this, the scientists argue that the cost would be virtually cancelled out anyway by another benefit—cutting the carbon dioxide emissions driving the climate crisis.

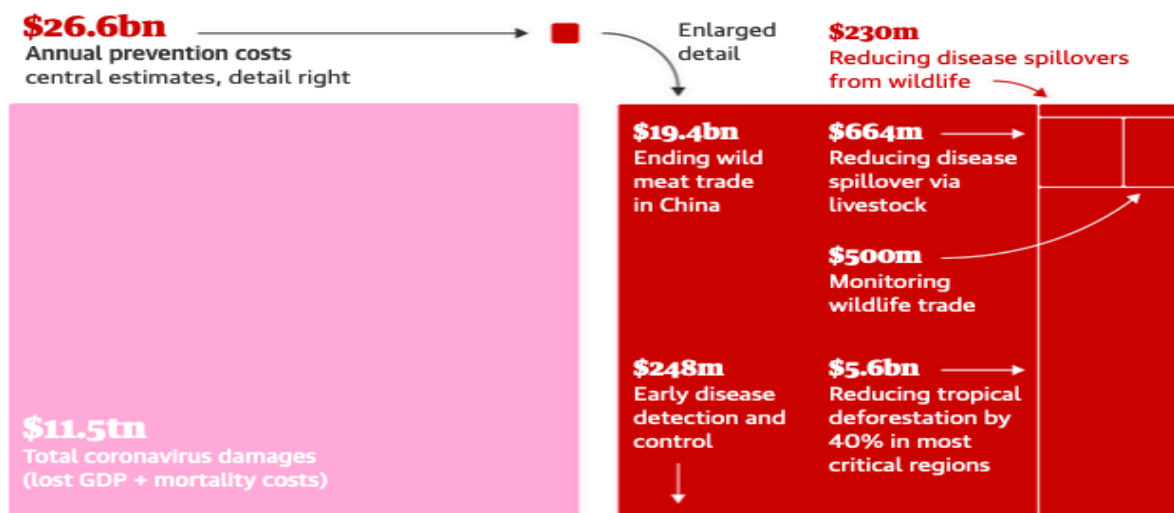


Figure 1. Annual costs of preventing future pandemics from wildlife are tiny when compared with costs of the Covid-19 crisis.

(Source: Dobson et al., 2020)

This brings me to the issue that faces my region critically in the immediate years ahead with climate change and the fate of three Pacific microstates that have landmasses and atolls barely higher than three to four meters above sea level. Among many cartoons that characterize this emergency is one that depicts a Pacific couple atop a thatched *fale* (traditional house) surrounded by the Pacific Ocean.

“Meanwhile on a low-lying South Pacific island ...” sums up the cartoon legend rather starkly of climate change dilemmas facing the Asia-Pacific region from the perspective of microstates. The Pacific village couple look out dismally across the ocean beyond a “drowned” coconut tree (Robie, 2019a).

“I hear in Paris, over 200 countries have signed a 31-page document agreeing to reduce greenhouse gases by 2050,” says the wife.

“I’d like to read that. Does it come in a waterproof edition?” replies her husband.

However, waterproof edition or not, the reality is that climate change is no longer a “laughing matter”, as Fiji Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama once described it. He was expressing his frustration at some Western countries before the global COVID-19 pandemic swept the planet that remained in denial about the impact of climate change already happening, especially in the low-lying Pacific atoll nations (PACNEWS, 2019).

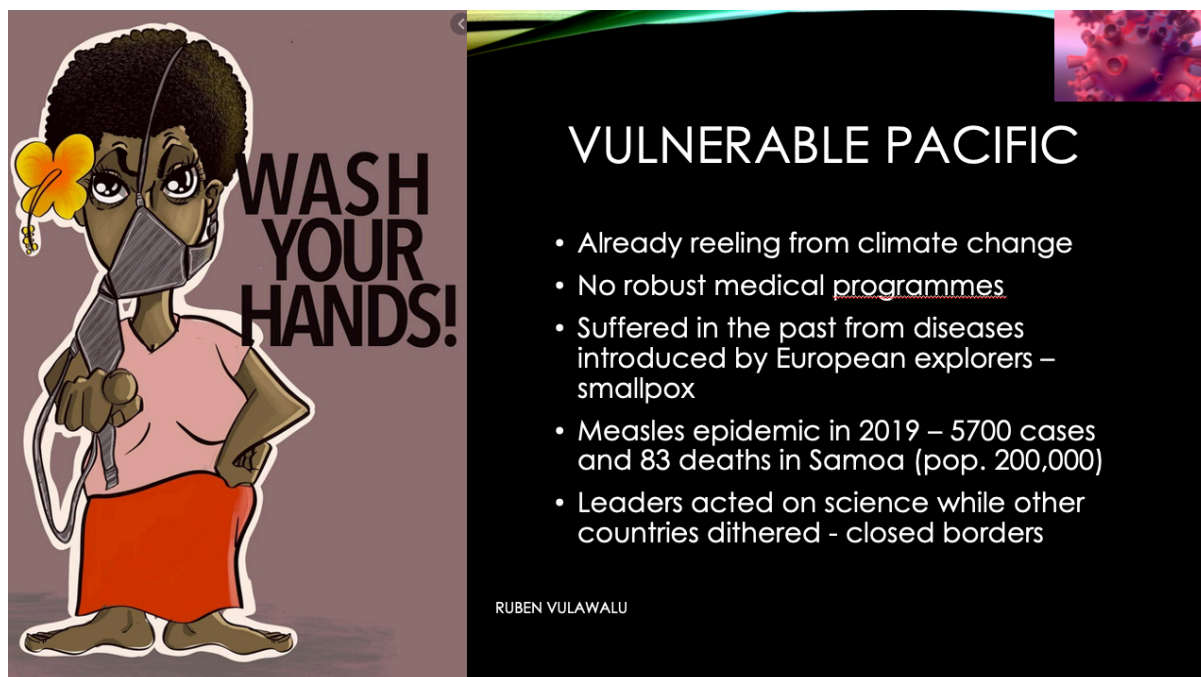


Figure 2. The vulnerable Pacific ... climate change still the existential threat.

(Source: Robie, 2020)

Pacific Nations Determined to Lead by Example

While remaining vulnerable to climate change, Pacific nations are determined to lead by example to prevent devastation from COVID-19 in their countries (Holland, 2020).

None of the independent Pacific countries have robust medical or epidemiological programmes, yet as Nobel Peace Prize co-winner Elisabeth Holland points out, their “leaders acted based on science while other countries were still debating whether stay-at-home measures were required”. She highlighted past crises:

“Pacific Islands countries suffered tremendously from the diseases brought by early explorers, including smallpox, measles, syphilis and gonorrhoea, and the memory still resonates. In recognition of their limited resources as well as the advantages of their remote location, Pacific countries have acted early to protect themselves and close their borders, with considerable success to date. The alarm and fear accompanying COVID-19 have galvanized action.” (Holland, 2020)

One of the factors that has shocked the Pacific region and much of the world is how Western countries, especially the United States, with reputedly more advanced economies had collapsed in the face of this relentless pandemic that has so far killed more than 2.1 million people and infected more than 100 million people—a quarter of those in the US (25.4 million).² What we have been witnessing is the demise of neoliberalism and rampant globalized growth that has underpinned many economies for the past four decades.

² John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center World Map statistics, as of 27 January 2021. The number of US deaths on that date was 424,690.

Neoliberalism has depleted state capacities in the name of the “super efficiency” of the market, fostering deindustrialization through the “globalization” production and built fragile financial structures “secured by magical thinking and state guarantees—all in the name of short-term profitability”, as Saad-Filho argues, writing in *Critical Sociology* (2020). It is no accident that those countries worst hit are often with the most advanced neoliberal economic systems that had neglected their public health structures, coupled with intransigent and inflexible leaders, such as in the United States with embattled and discredited former President Donald Trump and President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (516,166 infection cases and 10,386 deaths). Millions of Americans have lost their jobs and thus their health insurance policies in a privatized state system—a devastating economic and social tragedy. Think also Brazil (8.9 million infection cases) and President Jair Bolsonaro, and India (10.7 million) with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, all blindly following Trump.³ According to Saad-Filho:

“The private sector and the media begged for government spending and portentous preachers of the “free market” rushed to the TV screens to plead for unlimited public spending to save private initiative ... While neoliberalism found itself bereft of ideologues, a demented fringe of anti-vaxxers, flat Earthers, and religious fanatics howled hilarious denials of the existence of the pandemic, sometimes at great personal risk, peddled miracle cures based on faith, unproven remedies or prayed and fasted together.” (Saad-Filho, 2020)

The absurdities were highlighted when a rattled Trump, the leader of the world’s strongest economy, was driven to make a ludicrous attack on New Zealand three times in one week, declaring to a crowd in Pennsylvania on the last occasion that “it’s all over for New Zealand” and labelling it a “massive outbreak” (“It’s all over,” 2020; “Trump again claims,” 2020). His comments came the day after five new cases had been identified in New Zealand while new cases on the same day in the US were 46,500. The total number of infections in the US was then already 5.6 million—more than the total New Zealand population of barely 5 million. (RNZ, 2020)

In May 2019, barely a half year earlier, Pacific leaders were quite blunt when telling the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, that climate change was the single greatest threat facing their vast section of the world and that they were running out of time to do enough to avoid catastrophe (“Blue Pacific’s call,” 2019).

While hosting Guterres in Fiji, the leaders of countries belonging to the Pacific Island Forum (PIF), the region’s main political grouping, declared that they would like him to be a witness to the “everyday reality” of climate change in their huge oceanic backyard and to press for more urgent world action (“Gutteres calls,” 2019). They appealed in a joint statement:

“We will return to our island homes. Some of us will find our villages inundated by waves and our homes and public infrastructure wrecked by cyclones. Our coral reefs are dying, our food is disappearing, and we fear for the safety of our loved ones, who are being injured and even killed by some of the most ferocious of

³ John Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center World Map statistics, as of 27 January 2021.

cyclones and other extreme weather events ever witnessed in our region.” (Guterres calls, 2019)

The microstate leaders warned the world’s major polluters, “our *today* in the Pacific is undoubtedly your *tomorrow*”. They added, “sea level rise in Tuvalu is sea-level rise in New York, though one might go under before the other” (“Blue Pacific’s call,” 2019).

Fiji’s Bainimarama, the first Pacific island leader to have a role as a co-chair of the global COP23 climate summit, in Bonn, Germany, in 2017, famously said “we’re all in the same canoe”—an oceangoing *drua*. He pleaded for countries to seriously cooperate in tackling climate change. He also coined the term *talanoa* in the global climate context, a Fijian word meaning discussion and consultation (Toito’ona, 2018; “Talanoa is not just”, 2018; Robie, 2019a). (Although he has been under criticism domestically by opposition leaders for hypocrisy in not applying the principles of transparent dialogue at home (Chaudhary, 2020)).

Bainimarama warned in a speech in May 2019 in Australia, one of the reluctant climate change action nations because of its powerful fossil fuels industry—especially coal mining, that if people and nations did not work together the planet will be in chaos (“Cowards don’t,” 2019; Wilkinson, 2020). Wilkinson has exposed in *The Carbon Club* (2020) how a loose confederation of influential climate science skeptics, politicians, and business tycoons sought to control Australia’s response to the climate crisis and undermine the stance of Pacific leaders. Earlier, Bainimarama had explained why Canberra ought to support the 9 million Pacific Islanders living across the Pacific’s island nations.

“Because the effects of climate change are a threat to everyone, everywhere—from the disappearing coastlines of Bangladesh, to the scorching heat drying out land across sub-Saharan Africa, to the worsening flooding in low-lying cities in the United States, and in Australia as well, where soaring temperatures have hit record highs in several of your cities just this week.

“This cannot be written off as a difference of opinion. The consensus from the scientific community is clear and the existential threat posed to Pacific Island countries is a certainty.” (“Primer minister’s remarks”, 2019)

However, there have been encouraging trends too. For example, Britain has shifted almost a third of its electricity generation away from fossil fuels in just nine years (Wilson & Staffel, 2019), New Zealand has announced a zero-carbon policy by 2050 (Lyons, 2019), and tiny Tokelau, a Pacific dependency of New Zealand comprising just three islands and a population of a mere 1,500 people, is already entirely energized by solar power (Weissbach, 2017).

During his short Pacific tour in 2019, António Guterres visited Tuvalu (pop. 12,000), the world’s fourth-smallest state and one of the central Pacific island countries described by many commentators as a “disappearing nation” (Allen, 2004). The highest place in this country is 4.6 meters above sea level and the secretary-general described his visit as being at the “extreme frontline of the global climate emergency” (“Stop Tuvalu and,” 2019). He said the country was in danger of “drowning” and lessons there were a warning of “what’s in store for us all” unless the world treats climate change action with greater urgency.

Nearby Kiribati, a country of 32 scattered atolls and a population of 116,000 has become the poster nation for climate change—partly because of the impassioned advocacy of former President Anote Tong, who advocated a message of “migration with dignity” with humanitarian visas rather than climate refugees, and who was inspiring in his global message about the existential challenge of being faced with “imminent annihilation from sea-level rise” that he offered in the documentary *Anote’s Ark* (Rytz, 2018), directed by Matthieu Rytz. However, his successor, President Taneti Maamau, has taken the opposite tack, arguing for adaptation and fighting climate change at home. One of his plans is a 30-year project to build a higher village on Temaiku Bight, a transformative scheme with support from the UN Green Fund that might give 36,000 people an extra century to live in Kiribati.

According to Australia-based climate researchers Patrick Nunn and Roselyn Kumar, he is a president “determined not to capitulate to Western narratives of vulnerability” (2020). They regard Maamau’s pro-China policy and against migration as not simply a difference of opinion with his predecessor— “it’s a culturally grounded expression of human dignity”. They argue:

“Kiribati is made up of atolls—the sinking summits of volcanic islands from the flanks of which coral reefs grow upwards. Unconsolidated sands and gravels tossed up onto these reefs by storm waves form the atoll islands, which are typically narrow, sinuous, and low.”

“Most of us cannot imagine the everyday challenges of life there. The ocean is omnipresent, impossible to ignore, and a threat that could extinguish life on the island with just a short-lived flourish. ”

“But for too long, the people of Kiribati have been ‘pummelled and demeaned’ (Farbotko, 2019) by global narratives that treat them as vulnerable.”

“This view ignores the fact that proud peoples have lived on atolls in the equatorial Pacific for millennia, surviving countless disasters” (Nunn & Kumar, 2019).

In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the agency representing the world’s leading climate scientists, warned of the dire consequences of continued global warming, indicating the window of opportunity for action had narrowed to as little as 12 years (2018). Scientists of the IPCC, a United Nations body, have been warning since 1988 that human activity, industrialization, and the world’s dependence on fossil fuels have caused the warming of global temperatures that threaten life on Earth. In contrast, climate change deniers dismiss such dire premonitions as a conspiracy.

Challenge for Journalists and the Media

This crisis is a challenge for journalists and the media who need to counter misinformation and ignorance. While there is about a reported 97 percent scientific consensus about the cause of climate change (Scientific Consensus, n.d.), some media organisations, such as those owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch in Australia and the United States, give disproportionate oxygen to the deniers (Nash, 2015; Remekeis, 2019; Robie, 2014; Wilkinson, 2020).

Even the Philippines has significant pockets of deniers despite the frequency of disasters such as one of the world's worst typhoons, Haiyan, which in 2014 killed more than 6300 people, this was far worse than the biggest ever cyclone in the South Pacific, Winston in Fiji in 2016, which left 44 people dead and 350,000 people affected—almost 40 percent of the population—and the storms are hitting with increased frequency and greater savagery (Center for Climate and Energy Solutions, n.d.).

On 8 October 2018, when the IPCC launched its special report on the impact of 1.5°C global warming at a media conference in Incheon, South Korea, the message was chilling. In fact, scientists of the IPCC kept referring to the word “unprecedented” to stress the urgency of the challenge facing the world's governments and citizens. The policymakers' summary of the report noted that “pathways limiting global warming to 1.5°C ... would require rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings) and industrial systems ... These system transitions are unprecedented in terms of scale ...” (2018).

Yet global media coverage at the time was remarkably muted for such a development on the “biggest story of the century”, as Fahn (2019), director of the *Earth Journalism Network*, has described it. Clearly, journalists are facing a fundamental “reset” themselves in the way we treat climate change. It is not just another round, or beat, such as reporting the environment, health, or politics. It is a global existential threat and we should be treating it as such.

A former editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rushbridger, has branded climate change reportage as journalism's “great failure” (Lastikova & Henderson, 2019). A consensus among a growing number of journalists is that the issue needs to be treated holistically and across all disciplines, not just simply pigeonholed into one thread of journalism alone.

Professor Crispin C. Maslog's book *Science Writing and Climate Change* are both very timely and fill a critical need. It is a welcome contribution to how journalists can strategize and make a stronger commitment to #ClimateAction journalism (Maslog, Robie, & Adriano, 2019; Robie, 2019b). They are the keys in making sense of the growing impact of climate change on people's lives and how, instead of leaving them feeling powerless, giving them the incentive and tools for empowerment.

The first section of the book gives an overview of the role of science in development and about science education for the people. It offers some helpful guidelines for writing clear and effective science stories. Then the second section provides a range of typical articles published by Maslog in SciDev.Net as examples of effective science stories. This book will be an encouraging boost for young Asia-Pacific journalists from the Philippines to Palau, and Indonesia to Hawai'i in a vast region of the world which is already the frontline for the climate change struggle.

In another landmark book, *Climate Change: Investigating the Story of the Century*, Jim Fahn describes 10 promising investigative paths that journalists can explore to inquire into climate change issues. Some of these pathways were outlined in a resource offered by the Global Investigative Journalists Network (GIJN) (Table 1).

Table 1. *Climate crisis investigative journalism pathways*

The coal, oil, and gas industries are the most obvious target for investigative reports as they are the main driver of greenhouse gas emissions
Many other industries that are ripe for more in-depth reporting
Watching and reporting how vested interests are influencing government policies and what those policies are: “So, is your government trying to prevent climate change, or actually making it worse?”;
“Journalists needing to keep track not only of what goes on in their own countries, but also what their governments are doing abroad”
Examining efforts to enforce regulations and monitor compliance
Monitoring the offsets designed to counter the emissions
Doing a better job of reporting on climate change impacts
Investigating activist groups working on climate issues—Global Investigative examining their goals, and where they get their financial support
Investigating the solutions put forth to prevent and adapt to climate change
Examining the vast task ahead of adapting and responding to climate change

(Source: Fahn, 2019)

Some of these challenges can also be put to the test along with the other “story of the century”, COVID-19. The Earth Journalism Network’s parent organization, Internews, has developed a strategy for covering the global pandemic (Internews, 2020, p. 3; Robie, 2020). The Internews approach, as adopted by the Pacific Media Centre in parallel with its *Talanoa* indigenous journalism model (Robie, 2019a, Robie & Marbrook, 2020, Talanoa, 2020; Toito’ona, 2018) in its Pacific COVID and environmental journalism involves five core elements: 1. Good, accurate, evidence-based information; 2. That everyone can access safely; 3. That consumers know how to critically assess; 4. That is valued by communities and sustained by business models that work; and 5. Where governments and businesses are accountable for keeping it that way (Internews, 2020, pp. 2-3). These are the challenges as outlined by Internews:

People Need Clear, Evidence-Based Information They Can Understand and Act Upon to Stay Safe

Often times, governments and public health officials give conflicting, confusing, or incomplete guidance. People want to know if it is safe to go to work, if they can send their children to school, where food supplies are available, and what to do if they are showing symptoms. People need ‘News You Can Use’—news from local sources in their languages (including Pacific languages) to help understand what this epidemic means for them, their families, and their immediate communities.

Misinformation and Disinformation are Flooding All Information Environments

The spread of COVID-19 and the risks pose to communities is compounded by the lack of accurate and up-to-date information amid a proliferation of rumors, myths, and misinformation that exacerbate fear, panic, stigma, and mistrust, contributing to further mistrust of the health system and health workers, to mistrust of all information surrounding the outbreak, and to mistrust of preventative behaviors that can save lives. There is evidence that malign actors are purposefully sowing disinformation. People's distrust in corrupt or unaccountable governments helps misinformation and rumors to spread wildly.

Authoritarians Exploit Fear to Silence Dissent and Accountability

There has been a dramatic increase in crackdowns against freedom of expression in the face of COVID-19, often under the guise of combatting misinformation and rumors. Civic space has been rapidly closing around the world and the online space in particular is under assault, with governments censoring information online; rapidly expanding surveillance technologies and policies under the guise of contact-tracing, and exploiting confusion to achieve geopolitical gains. Multiple actors, from governments to hospitals and civil society organizations, are falling victim to digital attacks such as malware, ransomware, and phishing attacks.

Monitoring of these developments can be achieved through some COVID-19 trackers: International Center for not-for-profit Law (ICNL) (<https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/>), Privacy International (<https://privacyinternational.org/examples/tracking-global-response-covid-19>), and Reporters Without Borders #Tracker_19 (<https://rsf.org/en/tracker19-Coronavirus-Covid19>).

Activists Face Compounded Security Risks

While repressive regimes have been increasingly cracking down on information providers over the past decade, COVID-19 is adding to these risks. Journalists work in an environment of fear as they cover COVID-19 without adequate safety protection gear and amid intimidation from authorities and gangs. From Haiti to Iran, they have been barred from practicing journalism, suspended from social media, assaulted by the public, attacked by police, and even family members of journalists have faced reprisals.

The Media Market is Collapsing

The biggest story in the world is devastating the news media, as collapsing economies are causing a collapse in the news business, just when we need it most. COVID-19 has been called an 'extinction event' for local news, as advertising disappears and media around the world are shuttering. Even successful national news outlets are feeling the pinch from reduced advertising revenue. The pain at the local level, however, is extreme. Local advertising—the last thin lifeline for many local outlets—has been cut in half overnight and provide the most contextually important information for local communities.

The Internews approach to addressing COVID-19 is deeply rooted in our new strategy, which calls for building the five elements of a healthy information environment. These are:



1. Good, accurate, evidence-based information;
2. That everyone can access safely;
3. That consumers know how to critically assess;
4. That is valued by communities and sustained by business models that work; and
5. Where governments and businesses are accountable for keeping it that way.

Figure 3. Internews Approach.
(Source: Internews, 2020, p.4)

Conclusion

The science around both climate change and especially the COVID-19 pandemic are complex and evolving. Journalists, media curators, and content creators across the globe need support to report that science accurately—responsibly, safely, and in a way that helps their audiences take appropriate action. Also, they need to cover the way their communities and governments are responding. This can be a difficult challenge now with growing handicaps about being able to move around and travel; suffocating threats of censorship, harassment and detention; rapidly dwindling resources; and personal stress and individual health and safety concerns faced by everybody (Internews, 2020, p. 4).

When the UN's António Guterres was in New Zealand in 2019 as part of his Pacific tour, he spoke at Auckland University of Technology, calling on the youth of the world to be as "noisy as possible" of climate change. He appealed students to mobilize their societies, families, friends, and put governments under pressure because it would be too late to wait until they were in power. He has also appealed this year to the youth of the world about COVID-19, urging them to help strengthen the "immunity of our societies against the virus of hate" (Guterres, 2020). His message was that COVID-19 "does not care who we are, where we live, what we believe, or about any other distinction". Thus, global humanity needed "every ounce of solidarity" to tackle it collectively. "Yet the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating, and scare-mongering."

Guterres lamented the surge of anti-foreigner sentiment online and on the streets. He criticized the spread of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and the rise of COVID-19 anti-Muslim attacks. He also highlighted how migrants and refugees have been vilified as a source of the

virus – “and then denied access to medical treatment”. Guterres was also aghast at how elderly people – the most vulnerable – had been abused with memes suggesting they were “expendable”. He added: “And journalists, whistle blowers, health professionals, aid workers, and human rights defenders are being targeted simply for doing their jobs.” (Gutteres, 2020).

Many youths have been taking up the challenge, especially over climate change. Among Fiji’s young activist policymakers is Jenny Jiva, who says: “Climate change is a very real thing, we now know that it is happening, it’s not debatable anymore.” And in Europe, inspired by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg (Heinig, Nessen, & Grossman, 2020), the youthful Extinction Rebellion advocates are campaigning vigorously and fearlessly. Journalists ought to take heed and take action through their journalism and reportage if they care for the planet, our health, and our children. There are no simple PPE-wrapped or waterproof media guidelines for us. While some commentators (Editor, 2021) have argued that the demise of the Trump era and the return of the United States to global initiatives such as the Paris Accord on climate change and the World Health Organisation over the COVID-19 pandemic, other media monitors such as Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Without Borders, 2020) have warned that journalists are increasingly being targeted. Not only are reporters at risk for covering conflicts and corruption, but they are also facing greater dangers for exposing the “truth” about COVID-19. In its end-of-year-round-up, the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders reported that 50 journalists had been killed during 2020 and while those killed in countries at war continued to fall, “more are being murdered in countries not at war”. The media watchdog also reported a 35 percent increase in the number of women journalists arbitrarily detained and a fourfold climb in the arrests of journalists during the first three months of COVID-19’s spread around the world. “Fourteen journalists who were arrested in connection with their coverage of the pandemic are still being held,” added Reporters Without Borders (2020).

Professional bodies such as Internews see the major challenge of the pandemic era is the rise of authoritarianism and the risks posed to communities compounded by the lack of accurate and up-to-date information. This crisis is being confronted amid a proliferation of rumours, myths, and misinformation that exacerbate fear, panic, stigma, and mistrust. By providing professional, accurate, and dependable information, journalists can help citizens, especially those in Oceania facing an existential threat, deal with the damage caused by the tsunami of “fake news” and “alternative facts” that have been the hallmark of the Trump administration and like-minded governments.

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