Ever substantial story today, if we can “connect the dots”, has an environmental and ecological aspect to it. The Covid pandemic, for instance, one of the most tragic and significant events in the last 100 years, seemingly a health story, has its origins in the zoonotic transmission of viruses, when nature’s rules on cohabitation between humans and animals were broken which is at its basic, an ecology story.

It is imperative that journalists, who usually write the first draft on the environment must be trained and oriented on the skills and knowledge to find, and report the stories on the environment with authority and credibility.

The Workshop
The Workshop which was attended by 35 journalists from 23 grantees was divided into five sessions in an interactive classroom mode.

i) Reporting on the Environment
The first session which was ‘An introduction to reporting on the environment in association with Down To Earth
Participants during the IPSMF - DTE Workshop on Reporting the Environment, March 12, 2022

‘Writing with Fire’, a feature documentary on Khabar Lahariya was one of the three nominations for Oscars 2022 in the Documentary Feature category.

Khabar Lahariya also won the International Women's Media Foundation's Courage in Journalism Award 2021.


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environment’ was helmed by Richard Mahapatra, Managing Editor, DTE, who highlighted that it was impossible not to find an environmental angle to almost any story today. The trick was “joining the dots” between the event/issue and its environmental causations and consequences.

Most deviations from a reasonably long-term norm, form the basis for a story and one has to go beyond the headlines. Events (storms, cyclones, floods) are no more the real stories. The causations behind it, more often than not, are the stories.

This is especially so in a country like India, which has among the highest causalities as a result of the deteriorating environment. Participants learnt that some parts of India have not had a single normal month for more than three decades now, and the stories on the ecology, and climate refugees, are hidden in plain sight. If reporters look for it, the environmental angle surely stands out.

The session stressed the three key elements that reporters covering the environment should be conscious of; i) look for linkages between the local story and its global consequences, as changes in one part have an impact globally, ii) be aware of the chronology which led to the event and, iii) as much as possible humanise and tell stories through human characters.

When 60 per cent of the population in India depends on environmental assets such as agriculture and forest produce, most stories will have an environmental aspect. It is for the reporter to join the dots.

Meanwhile, data journalism and visualisation are emerging as the new way to tell a story effectively.

**ii) Sourcing environmental information**

The second session, presented by Kiran Pandey, Programme Director at the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), expanded on the theme of access to credible and trusted data. Writing and reporting on the environment needs access to the most credible and trusted information, data from regular sources, that show trends and are unadulterated and easy to access. For instance, websites like www.ourworldindata.org or the Central Pollution Control Board (cpcb.nic.in). The government websites can also be a rich source of information.

For a regular reporter on the environment, it also entails creating and maintaining a personal list of resources – ‘a data diary’. Reporting on the environment needs “evidence-based information” and the stories with numbers have a higher recall value and credibility.

*(A collation of the most important and credible resources on the environment prepared by the DTE team was mailed out to the participants at the end of the workshop.)*

**iii) Storytelling with data**

The third session, ‘Storytelling with data’, was anchored by Rajit Sengupta, Sr Assistant Editor, DTE. It focussed on offering practical tips on how to structure a story and pick trends from a given set of data. The most critical part of data is to catch and plot the trend.

The stories can be of three types: i) the outlier story – a story in which data indicates extremes, ii) the trend story – where a trend has been broken or shows distinct patterns and, iii) the correlation story – where two or more variables change together.

The challenge in the use of data was to not get overwhelmed but to cull out the central idea of the story from the numbers and then use the figures to contextualise, buttress and expand on the story.

A ‘classroom mode’ exercise was conducted in which the participants constructed a story plan on ‘Are India’s groundwater resources safe?’ The factors considered for deriving a story framework included - identifying the ingredients of information and the sources, prioritising information and creating the structure and flow.

Creating a resource of links and data sources and going regularly to these sites, almost daily helps to catch any changes, trends and turning points almost intuitively.

**iv) Visualising data for reporting**

The fourth session, also by Sengupta, on ‘Visualising data for reporting’ – went into the use of tools to visualise and present data through interactive graphics. It is just not enough to research and cull out a story, it is equally important to present it in a manner that is easily understood.

A live demo was conducted using Google Spreadsheet for importing data from a website and also using free-software data visualisation tools like ‘Datawrapper’. This would help participants create clear, aesthetically appealing visuals from the data, for their stories.
Online Hyperlocal Journalism: Gaining Ground

The all-pervasiveness of the digital medium has lowered entry barriers for journalists, who wish to venture out on their own. News gathering, production and dissemination costs for the online medium are a fraction of what it costs for print and television media ventures.

The mobile phone with in-built camera, availability of low-cost editing software and the almost no-cost facility of dissemination (through YouTube and other social media platforms) has dramatically altered the scenario for news gathering and the distribution of news.

This has meant, among other things, a steady expansion of online hyperlocal journalism – reporting on communities within tight geographical areas at the very mofussil level. It fills a gap in the coverage of issues and areas that have been under-served in the past by legacy media, as the returns in terms of readership or revenues did not justify the costs.

This space is now increasingly being explored by independent digital news organisations who report local issues from the very epicentre of the hinterland. Not only do they fill a gap but they also serve a larger purpose. Almost suddenly, issues on the ground are perforce being reported on and pursued even by the national media.

The rampant inadequacies in the state’s delivery of services – a primary health centre with no doctors and medicines amid the pandemic, the non-delivery of rations at the local PDS shop, the dilapidated state of roads and bridges in the local area, the inadequacy of mid-day meal schemes at the local school – all these have begun to be captured and reported.

This local reporting has also generated a local response loop, in which the local administration and local representatives are pressurised and persuaded to act and redress issues before they blow up in their faces.

This hyperlocal coverage also generates a cult and loyal following at the local school – all these have begun to be captured and reported.

A prime example of this is many of the Foundation’s own grantees. Khabar Lahariya (KL), reporting on the local issues in Bundelkhand, now has more than half a million subscribers on its YouTube channel. It covers local issues like water shortage, the non-implementation of government schemes, the joblessness in the villages

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and the towns, the poor state of public infrastructure and corruption, amongst others. Their stories have had a significant impact on the ground.

For instance, Khabar Lahariya’s report on the Kol Adivasis who had been residing in Lauri village for over five decades without a home to call their own. The local land mafia had thwarted all their efforts to get permanent housing. After KL reported their plight, an official investigation was carried out and eventually, the process of allocating permanent housing began.

Reporting in Marathi on the hinterlands of Maharashtra is another grantee Max Maharashtra. With a network of reporters in under-served areas of the State, it has been reporting on the lives of the most vulnerable from the local areas.

The impact of their reportage on the poor state of healthcare facilities at the only government health centre catering to 32 villages in Patan Taluka of Satara district of Maharashtra is a case in point. The Centre did not have a doctor or medical staff and largely remained shut. This report led to the administration appointing a doctor to the health centre. For the first time in a decade that a doctor was assigned to this centre!

Two other grantees Democratic Charkha (DC) and मैं Media, on their part cover separate regional districts of Bihar. DC covers three districts of Bihar – Patna, Begusarai and Sheikhpura from the ground, while मैं Media covers the Seemanchal-Kosi region of Bihar - the districts of Purnea, Katihar, Kishanganj and Araria that are close to the borders of West Bengal; Nepal and Bangladesh.

Both the entities have been successful in exposing the inadequacies and inefficacy of the governance in the districts.

With a team of young founders and editors, DC is an inclusive organisation with representation from the minority and transgender communities. DC rigorously reports on gaps in governance, non-delivery of public goods, gender discrimination, abysmal infrastructure, government apathy and corruption. The hyperlocal reporting and consistent follow up have helped drive real impact on the ground. Its dissemination of coverage through social media and networking apps like WhatsApp has helped them expand its reach and traction.

When DC reported this story on the Centre’s claim of 100% electrification as not true in Bihar, with many villages in the Begusarai region living without power, its report on the Sarabkoti village was taken up by the local BDO and the village was electrified in four months benefiting 1,200 citizens.

मैं Media rigorously focuses on the coverage of important issues spanning farming, rights, delivery of public services, corruption, hate crimes, and people’s movements, amongst others. Its focused local coverage has pushed the administration to act and has also gained substantial momentum on YouTube with over 4 lakh subscribers.

During the first lockdown, मैं Media reported on the plight of 52 migrant labourers from Bihar who covered a journey of over 600 kms on foot from Assam to Kishanganj, facing hunger and thirst. They had to cover another 250 kms to reach Samastipur. Following the coverage, the local people stepped in to help the migrants with food and shelter.

All these examples are a testimony to the hyperlocal media, an idea that has arrived and increasingly gaining traction. It is also heartening to find other regional media in print and television following up on issues that are first highlighted by the hyperlocal online news media.

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Ipsmf.org

story got national attention and Anganwadis in the same area. The government closed schools and denied education after the children in this area have been follow-up story on how scores of 14 others. The grantee also did a killing of three people and injured "encroachers". The drive led to the reclaim government land from aftermath of the eviction drive to magistrates to take action against a direction to all district Services Director Dr K Rajo issued use of fake RT-PCR negative media. was later picked up by other story broke nationally. The story happening on the ground as the perspective to what was conversion law and provided vital before the state passed an anti-Karnataka districts, appeared just months of reporting in four Karnataka districts, appeared just before the state passed an anti-conversion law and provided vital perspective to what was happening on the ground as the story broke nationally. The story was later picked up by other media.

Article 14's story 'As BJP Talks Up Law Against Conversions, Attacks Against Christians Rise In Karnataka', the product of three months of reporting in four Karnataka districts, appeared just before the state passed an anti-conversion law and provided vital perspective to what was happening on the ground as the story broke nationally. The story was later picked up by other media.

Following reports published by Impal Free Press about travelers flouting COVID rules and rise in the use of fake RT-PCR negative certificates, Manipur’s Health Services Director Dr K Rajo issued a direction to all district magistrates to take action against such violations in the state.

EastMojo ground reported from Dhalpur village in the Darrang district of Assam, on the horrific aftermath of the eviction drive to reclaim government land from "encroachers". The drive led to the killing of three people and injured 14 others. The grantee also did a follow-up story on how scores of children in this area have been denied education after the government closed schools and Anganwadis in the same area. The story got national attention and was picked by other media.

Following Khabar Lahariya's reporting on the dilapidated state of the Ghazipur Road in the Ashapur area of Varanasi, the road was repaired and given a facelift bringing relief to thousands of commuters.

The News Minute's coverage of how the Hyderabad police checked citizens’ phones and WhatsApp chats for keywords like Ganja, drugs, etc., led to the wide criticism of the police who faced a backlash as such surveillance was seen as an infringement of privacy. The story also led to a legal notice being sent to the Hyderabad Commissioner of Police by an independent privacy researcher, with the assistance of the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) asking the police to stop this unlawful surveillance activity.

As the political heat was rising in Uttar Pradesh just prior to the elections, there were calls for the "reclaiming" of the Sri Krishna Janmabhoomi in Mathura, which abuts the Shahi Eidgah. Live History India's report delved into the past and pointed out that the issue has been long "settled" in a '1968 Agreement'.

Janjwar had reported on a ration scam in Garhwa district of Jharkhand where 33 tribal families were deprived of their rations as the local administration had declared them dead. Following its coverage, the administration sprung into action and created ration cards for 31 families who will now have access to provisions.

The Probe's ground reports from Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh revealed the hard truth that in spite of the claims of having eradicated open defecation, many women still have no choice but to continue the practice.
Once these tipping points are crossed, they will become irreversible. The Arctic region is the “climate capital of the world” and even small changes there have an impact on climate globally. It is now warming four times faster than the rest of the world.

He explained what happened at the recently held COP26 in Glasgow, Scotland, which witnessed some positive developments but not enough to reverse climate change. A lot of countries came out with ‘net-zero’ commitments which was set by India for the year 2070. Even with all the pledges at COP26 – the planet is still set to warm by 2.4 degree Celsius by 2100 – an untenable situation.

The year 2021 was a year of extremes for India with extreme rainfall in Uttarakhand, erratic monsoons and “weird” cyclones.

Examples of the stories that DTE had done which illustrated in graphic detail the all too palpable impact of climate change in the Northeast of India, were shared with participants. If participants were to cover local events, for instance, in the Northeast, it is critical for a reporter to do her/his homework - study already published data and information, then visit the site...