



Integrated Programme for Better Air Quality in Asia (IBAQ Programme)

CITY SOLUTIONS TOOLKIT: ENGAGING THE MEDIA IN AIR QUALITY COMMUNICATION

THE SITUATION

The media is an important partner in the fight against air pollution and a valuable ally in helping to:

- Raise awareness about the complex issue of air pollution.
- Ensure accurate interpretations of air quality data.
- Assess the effectiveness of mitigation efforts.
- Help advocate for policy and behavioral changes.
- Promote more environmentally, socially and economically sound multi-sector responses.

Communication is an integral component of the air quality management (AQM) framework. Helping people understand the sources and implications of air pollution and the impacts of mitigation measures and policies, as well as the direct benefits and co-benefits of individual behavioral change, can lead to better health, social, environmental and economic outcomes, and help to strengthen democratic processes through improved citizen engagement. Conversely, ineffective communication denies the public the ability to make informed life, behavioral and electoral choices, and compromises their role as informed citizens capable of independently contributing to emissions reductions.

The media, with its ability to disseminate information both rapidly and widely, plays a vital role in reaching the public and different stakeholder groups, and is hence an important ally in air quality management. It is an instrument of change, with the ability to influence people's attitudes and draw attention to the challenges

that exist and possible solutions. A knowledgeable and empowered media enables better public understanding of the sources of air pollution, air quality data, government policies and mitigation efforts, health impacts and preventive actions; and enables the public and other stakeholders to play a key role in taking action to improve air quality.

However, knowledge and capacity gaps, sensationalism, and challenges with stakeholder engagement have been identified as problematic across the print, broadcast and digital media spectrum. Clean Air Asia media trainings for journalists on air quality and additional literature reviews have found that news reports on air pollution are generally poorly correlated with air quality, and facts are often exaggerated to inject dramatic elements into news stories to titillate the public (Ramirez et al, 2019).



Air quality is a complex issue involving multiple sources and having multiple impacts, and requires the media to reflect the full depth of the problems and issues, and ensure there is proper context and analysis. The key challenges identified include a lack of understanding of technical terminology and air quality data and interpretation; the types of pollutants being monitored and measured; the different sources of air pollution and their impacts; air quality trends and patterns over time; who and/or what is being affected and how; the influence of a range of factors on air quality, including location, climatic conditions, temperature, seasonal changes, and traffic conditions; the variability of air quality indices from city to city and country to country in terms of the type of pollutants monitored, the range of values, the banding, and the equipment used; and political partisanship.

This module seeks to address those challenges and serve as an air quality communications guide for journalists and media outlets, and as a valuable resource for governments and stakeholders to help facilitate better media engagement and ensure the public's information needs are met.

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT FOR CITIES

Effective media reporting on air quality issues requires that information be accurate, comprehensible, relevant and, importantly, targeted to the right audience as different sectors and population groups invariably have different information needs. There is, however, a tendency for the media to adopt one-size-fits-all reporting approaches that may not correspond with stakeholders' demand for information and that may not reach the intended target groups or have the desired outcomes. It is therefore imperative that journalists are able to differentiate between audiences and craft appropriately targeted news stories that reflect the diverse types of air quality information being sought.

Improved media engagement also helps to promote a better understanding of different stakeholder groups' positions and viewpoints, which in turn helps build consensus among stakeholders on mitigation solutions that will result in better and more inclusive air quality outcomes and the development of a shared vision for the future.

The media is also in a position to influence policymakers to facilitate changes in the regulatory and legislative frameworks to build institutional and public support for air quality mitigation initiatives by helping people understand the problems, issues and processes involved, the pressing need for solutions, and the benefits and co-benefits of the proposed solutions, which will help bolster broader public buy-in.

The development of a media engagement strategy for cities (see Table 1) is an important component of the overall communications planning process. It lays the foundation for the development of an informed media network that will enable better communications outreach and more accurate coverage of air quality issues.



Table 1: Media engagement planning for cities

MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Who in the media do you need to engage with and enlist support from?	
What barriers or challenges, real or potential, exist that may hinder the participation or buy-in of different journalists and media outlets?	
What will need to be done to address those barriers or challenges?	
What role will the media play?	
How will the identified media/journalists be reached, and what will be the frequency of communication/consultation?	
In relation to the air quality issues being addressed, what is the level of relevant knowledge of each of the identified media outlets/journalists?	
What sort of information/materials, resources and support do each of those identified media outlets/journalists need?	
How can it be ensured that media coverage of air quality issues is accurate, fair, balanced and ethical?	
What are the most effective communications channels and materials to reach the media?	
What reporting and monitoring mechanisms will be developed to ensure the effectiveness of media engagement?	
What will be the frequency of reporting?	
How will reports be disseminated?	



MEDIA REPORTING ON AIR QUALITY

Good reporting on air pollution involves:

- Accurate, reliable and contextualized interpretation of air quality data (from air monitoring stations, the Air Quality Index).
- Enabling people to understand what air quality data means and how it affects them.
- Enabling people to understand the different sources of air pollution and their individual impacts.
- The simplification/clarification of technical terminology.
- Information on the health, environmental, and economic impacts of air pollution.
- Information on the impacts of air pollution on social and health services, such as hospitals and the health care sector.
- Information on who is being affected and how, and who is most at risk.
- A focus on air quality trends and patterns over time to provide a more accurate understanding of the state of air quality.
- Information on the mitigation actions that are being taken or can be taken to reduce air pollution.
- Information about local and national government policies on air pollution, and mitigation initiatives.
- The promotion of cleaner alternatives, such as renewable sources of energy and electric mobility.
- The promotion of changes to people's actions and behaviors.

However, it is important for journalists to be cognizant of the fact that people do not have the same level of knowledge about air pollution, and that different factors shape public attitudes and behavior in relation to air quality, including:

- Interpretation of information: How people interpret information is based on their existing beliefs.
- Psychological factors: The values, attitudes and emotions that affect behavior and contribute to a sense of responsibility.
- Habits: The habitual and routine behavior that contributes to polluting emissions.
- Structural conditions: The infrastructure, or lack of it, that can present obstacles to behavioral change, such as lack of electricity and cleaner sources of cooking and heating.
- Socio-demographic status and patterns: Factors such as people's age, gender, level of education, and social and economic status all contribute to differing levels of awareness and understanding.



It is also important for journalists to examine and understand policies and legislation, have realistic time-frame expectations for air pollution abatement, and recognize that air pollution is not a partisan political issue; rather, it is an issue that affects all people, irrespective of political affiliation. Hence, in addressing the challenges, it is important for the media to transcend political biases and the eschew the perpetuation of disunity and societal division.

PREREQUISITES FOR AIR QUALITY REPORTING

1. News story planning and structuring

It's important for journalists to ask the following questions:

- What type of news story is going to be published or broadcast?
- Which news outlets have released similar stories?
- How will this news story differ from others that are similar?
- What is the desired goal of the news story (general awareness-raising, mobilizing people for action, changing attitudes/practices, influencing policy change)
- What is the target audience and the anticipated response from that audience?
- What is the desired impact of the story?

2. Research

Allow sufficient time to plan and research news stories, inclusive of identifying all possible sources and the data needed. Questions to be ask include:

- Have the appropriate sources been identified?
- Has the integrity and credibility of sources been checked?
- Is the data being used reliable, credible, and from an official source?
- Has background research on the topic been conducted to ensure appropriate context is provided for readers/viewers?

3. Interviews

Journalists should ensure that the people they interview are relevant to the news story, are credible, and are being interviewed to add depth, perspective and context, and not merely to add inflammatory or provocative sound bites or generate unnecessary controversy.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF REPORTING ON AIR QUALITY

1. Write for the audience:

- What do the audience/readers need and want to know?
- What kind of information will be useful for them?
- Is the language and content appropriate for the target audience?



2. Clearly state messages:

- What is the objective of the news story?
- What do people need to know and understand by reading/viewing the story?
- What takeaways should the audience have after reading/viewing the story?

A straightforward approach to air quality reporting: [***Air Pollution: Everything You Should Know About a Public Health Emergency***](#) by Damian Carrington, Environment Editor, The Guardian

3. Explore unique angles.

- Has the story been written about/reported on in other publications?
- Does the issue stand on its own as a news story?

A story on New Delhi's air pollution, with the focus on a law that may have affected the city's air quality: [***The Law That's Helping Fuel Delhi's Deadly Air Pollution***](#) by Vox journalist Umair Ifran

4. Focus on air quality trends and patterns, rather than city/country rankings:

- Why is air pollution increasing/decreasing in a particular area?
- What rate is air pollution increasing/decreasing over time?
- What do these trends mean?
- What is the implication of identified trends on air quality management, public health, the environment, policymakers, and the economy?

5. Use visualizations to illustrate trends and patterns:

- What sort of visual representations will make the data used more readily understandable for the public? Graphs? Maps? Infographics?

The New York Times published an interactive story on air pollution that used simple air quality visualizations and charts: [***How the World's Most Polluted Air Compares With Your City's***](#) by Nadja Popovich, Blacki Migliozi, Karthik Patanjali, Anjali Singhvi and Jon Huang

6. Exercise caution when expressing probabilities:

- Do numeric representations paint a complete and accurate picture of the situation?
- Are the figures being used adequately contextualized?

7. Never forget the human dimension of the story:

- Who will be the most impacted, and who is most vulnerable?
- How will people be affected?

8. Follow-up news stories:

- Provide updates on stories to ensure coverage is given to any developments that may take place.



THE PITFALLS OF REPORTING ON CITY/COUNTRY AIR QUALITY RANKINGS

Rankings of cities and countries in terms of air pollution can provide us with some important insights into the state of air quality, which in turn helps raise awareness about levels of air pollution. However, air quality is defined by a number of variables, such as pollution sources, climatic conditions, temperature, humidity, geography, and the individual characteristics of different urban landscapes. Air quality data is also influenced by the mechanics of monitoring, such as [monitoring location, the number and placement of monitoring sites](#), the frequency of monitoring, the percentage of data captured per site and, importantly, the [accuracy of the instruments used](#). Isolated air quality measurements are therefore not necessarily reflective or indicative of a city's or cities' overall state of air quality, and should not be used for generalized city/country rankings.

It is important for journalists to remember that:

- Air quality is dynamic and not static. Measurements and quantifications of air quality vary throughout the day and night. The level of an air pollutant is also defined by proximity to pollution sources and by the environmental conditions in the area; hence, a measurement on its own is not indicative of the overall state of air quality.
- Air quality measurements are not solely a factor of pollution load; they are influenced by a range of factors, including climatic conditions, temperature, humidity, seasonal changes, geography, urban landscapes, and human activities.
- Air pollution data is influenced by how air quality monitoring is performed, such as monitoring location, number of sites, frequency of monitoring, percentage of data captured per site, and the accuracy of the instruments used.
- If the air quality data of various cities is to be compared or ranked, it must be ensured that:
 - a. Cities have similar contexts (defined by the aforementioned range of factors influencing air quality).
 - b. Monitoring sites are representative and comparable, and the physical requirements of monitoring sites are uniformly implemented.
 - c. Cities should have similar institutional and legal frameworks that enable efficient and effective air quality monitoring.

For example, City A with a higher pollution load but more favorable meteorological conditions (weather, atmospheric conditions that allow for better dispersion of pollutants) may have better air quality than City B with a lower pollution load but less-favorable meteorological conditions. It is hence not appropriate to conclude that City A is less polluted than City B.

When reporting air quality information, it is important to:



- Focus on trends and air quality patterns over time to provide a more accurate understanding of the state of air quality (i.e., monitoring data should at least span one year to account for seasonality, transboundary transport, etc.).
- Consider the city's air quality management system - human and financial resources allocated for this issue, policies in place and actions taken - to provide a more holistic picture of the state of air quality.
- Explain the monitoring methodology and the limitations of the process.
- Avoid reporting the data of only one or two pollutants in a city as that is insufficient to describe the overall state of air quality.
- Be aware that different cities may have different pollutants of concern.

Source: Clean Air Asia (2019)

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