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Extreme heat events: Media communicatio with impact

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Key Messages

- Media reporting on **extreme heat events** can affect public perception of risk and the protective measures people take in response.
- Interviews were conducted with 12 media professionals and public health communicators to highlight the issues they face when communicating about extreme heat events.
- **Key challenges** identified by this study included:
  - Audience disengagement: Negative, repetitive reporting can cause apathy and disengagement. Balancing urgency with engaging, fresh narratives is challenging.
  - Resource constraints: Limited budgets, staff turnover, and reduced newsroom capacity can affect the consistency and quality of in-depth coverage.
  - Reaching diverse audiences: Barriers like the Meta news ban, limited multilingual support, and centralized editorial control hinder inclusive and accessible reporting.
  - Data and information access, experts, and visual storytelling: Limited access to reliable data, experts, and lack of impactful visuals depicting extreme heat can lead to misrepresentation or trivialization.
- **Key solutions** identified in this study included:
  - Improving access to data and experts: Accessible and easy-to-use platforms for real-time data, alongside expert directories, and practical heat and health communication resources could support accurate and consistent reporting.
  - Enhance engagement with diverse audiences: Solution-oriented, local storytelling, focused on those at higher risk of heat-related illness or death, multilingual content and relatable local experts can improve engagement with diverse audiences.
  - Support training and education: Training and education opportunities could deepen climate knowledge, counter misinformation, and enhance media literacy and foster collaboration.

Introduction

Heatwaves, also known as extreme heat events, are becoming more prolonged, frequent, and severe due to climate change, and they can result in heat-related illnesses and deaths.[1] The unprecedented extreme heat event of 2021 in British Columbia (B.C.), known as the 2021 Heat Dome, led to 619 heat-related deaths. Of these deaths, 98 percent of the fatal heat-related injuries occurred indoors, mostly in private residences without adequate indoor cooling.[2] All heat-related deaths are considered to be accidental, preventable deaths because they would not happen in the absence of extreme heat.[2]

Certain populations are at heightened risk of heat-related injury and death if they do not have access to thermally safe environments. The people most at risk are older adults, those with underlying physical

impairments, chronic disease, mental illness, cognitive impairment or dependence, especially if they live alone. People using certain prescription medicines, people who are pregnant, and infants and young children are also at higher risk.[3] Preparing the public for future extreme heat events is key to reducing adverse health outcomes, especially for groups that are at greater risk.[4]

Communicating to the public about heat-health risks relies on public agencies issuing heat alerts or warnings and media sources elevating important messages:

- **Public agencies** issue heat alerts and warnings when certain environmental conditions are met, which help to convey that heat-health risks exist.[5] These alerts may provide a temperature forecast, information on heat-related health risks, and information on protective actions, such as accessing cooling stations, tips on keeping cool, and advice on carrying out heat-health checks.[4]

- **Media professionals** such as journalists, reporters, photojournalists, and editors, play important roles in conveying public health information and preparing the public before and during extreme heat events.[6] Media coverage and framing can influence how the public assesses extreme heat risks and their importance. However, media professionals may not have the public health or meteorological expertise needed to contextualize key messages.[7-9]

A previous literature scan conducted by the NCCEH, Storyline of a silent killer: Extreme heat and media communication, identified key resources and guidance from agencies such as the Global Heat Health Information Network (GHHIN) on improving the impact, effectiveness, and public value of extreme heat-related reporting. However, there are knowledge gaps on perspectives of media professionals who report about extreme heat events in Canada.

To fill these knowledge gaps, the NCCEH sought to gather viewpoints from a small subset of Canadian media professionals and public health communicators about reporting on extreme heat. The objectives of this work were to improve understanding of how the media communicates about extreme heat events, identify key challenges or gaps related to extreme heat reporting, and highlight solutions to address these challenges.

Methodology

Recruitment

A three-member advisory panel consisting of one media professional and two public health communication professionals assisted in developing the methodology for this study and identifying possible key experts with specialist knowledge to interview. An initial list of 45 potential interviewees was created, and these individuals were invited by email to participate in the consultation or recommend other potential consultees. This process resulted in the recruitment of 12 interviewees.

Interview process

Interviewees participated in a 45-minute semi-structured interview with NCCEH staff via Zoom. An interview guide was developed in advance in consultation with the advisory panel. The interview guide was designed to identify typical practices for creating news stories (pitching, assigning, researching, developing, writing, editing, producing, etc.), challenges encountered within these activities, and solutions to address existing and emerging problems. At the start of the conversation, interviewees were introduced to the project and provided information on privacy and data analysis. They provided consent for NCCEH to record interviews, report on findings, and quote anonymously. Interview questions were a mix of fixed and open-ended questions. These focused first on current approaches to extreme heat reporting, followed by questions on challenges and proposed solutions to address them. Because the interviews were semi-structured, the conversations varied, and some led to questions that were not included in the interview guide.

Interview analysis

NCCEH staff conducting the interviews captured both fixed and open-ended responses by taking notes. Interviews were also recorded with permission, to ensure notetaking was accurate. Notes were combined after the interview and supplemented using the interview transcript recording where necessary. Responses were analyzed in aggregate and reported anonymously. Responses to individual questions were collated from all interviewees and organized in a spreadsheet to allow for thematic analysis. Common themes across interviewees were identified, noting the frequency and additional relevant context. Not all interviewees were asked about each specific theme, so the number of respondents who mentioned a theme should not be interpreted as an indication of its overall prevalence.

Interview themes

Eleven interviewees who work in print, digital, radio, and TV news media at local, regional, and national outlets participated in interviews, and one submitted written responses to a set of questions provided by email. Interviewees self-identified as journalists (n = 5), reporters (n = 2), journalist/radio show host (n = 1), senior meteorologist (n = 1), assignment editor (n = 1), and editor in chief (n = 1). One interviewee was a public health communications expert, self-identifying as a director of communications.

The analysis of the interview responses identified themes under the following headings:

- **Current approaches** to media reporting and producing stories on extreme heat
- **Challenges in reporting** on extreme heat and health
- **Potential solutions** to improve heat-health media communications

The following sections present the key themes and sub-themes identified under these headings.

Current approaches for reporting and producing stories on extreme heat

Interviews with reporters, editors, and producers identified common approaches to reporting and producing stories on extreme heat (Table 1).

The media professionals interviewed in this study reported employing local, human-centred, fresh narratives with unique angles that focus on community resilience and relevance to people's day-to-day lives. Added to this, writers and editors strive to address narratives for at-risk populations by balancing coverage with serious "survival information," positive actions, practical solutions, and information about public health and community supports.

A widely reported theme was that pitching climate stories follows the same general news criteria. There is a focus on timeliness, proximity, and relevance, and the topic may be linked to current events or anticipated extreme weather. The longstanding adage "if it bleeds, it leads" drives coverage.

> *"I think, first of all, the volume of coverage and the tone of coverage is proportional to the number of deaths."*

The interviewees that cover extreme heat reported that they tend to focus on local, human-centred stories featuring at-risk individuals, offering practical tips and positive solutions. While few attend pre-season briefings, some actively monitor forecasts and data from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) to anticipate and report on heat events. Some interviewees said they often consult local experts from health authorities, hospitals, and universities, using accurate data from government sources, health agencies, and scientific studies. Visuals used by interviewees were reported to range from authentic, in-house imagery to carefully selected stock or wire photos that reflect the story's context.

Table 1. Current approaches for reporting and producing stories on extreme heat — Themes identified in interviews

What are the key approaches for reporting and producing stories on extreme heat?
Story focus and pitch
• The media professionals focused on local, human-centred stories about people at risk with practical tips and positive solutions (7/12) • They reported pitching and assigning follows similar rules as other news, focusing on timeliness, proximity, and relevance, and may be linked to current events or anticipated extreme weather (5/12)
Data, information, and experts
• Half of the media professionals have taken the opportunity to attend pre-heat season briefings (6/12) • A small number followed data from Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) and other sources to detect potential heat events early, aiming to alert the public with timely, specific forecasts (2/12) • Research and development of stories has used experts from health authorities, hospitals, and universities — prioritizing local experts if possible (5/12) • Researching and developing stories requires accurate data and information from Canadian government reports and websites (e.g., ECCC), local health authorities and municipalities, occupational guidelines, scientific studies, and international sources (3/12)
Visuals
• Impactful and authentic in-house imagery/visuals are used by some (4/12), while others rely on wire and stock visuals that match the context (3/12)

Note: The number of respondents out of 12 is listed in brackets. As not all interviewees were asked directly about each specific theme, the number of respondents who mentioned a theme should not be interpreted as an indication of its overall prevalence.

Challenges of reporting on extreme heat and health

Several challenges were identified throughout the interviews. The themes (Table 2) relate to the following:

- Story narrative and context
- Story reach and impact
- Access to data, information, other resources, and use of terminology
- Organizational constraints

Story narrative and context

Some of the media professionals that were interviewed raised concerns that doom-filled narratives about the impacts of climate change can lead to public disengagement, and recurring extreme weather events contribute to news fatigue. Journalists and other media professionals must continuously find new angles and approaches to communicate about extreme heat, keeping content timely and locally relevant.

> *"So, something that we've been seeing in a lot of studies coming out around climate journalism is that the doom and gloom really turns people off.[…]…the adage is: "If it bleeds, it leads", so there's this old reflex that if you put something dramatic or conflict-oriented in the headline, people are going to click on it. But we're finding that this is turning people off."*

A couple of the interviewees maintained that there is a low level of audience capacity and interest in information on extreme heat. Consequently, while extreme heat events are increasingly frequent and deadly, the topic is often underrepresented in news coverage and is considered a niche issue.

> *"And so, there's that law of diminishing returns, where it [extreme heat] just becomes normalized."*

Table 2. Challenges for reporting and producing stories on extreme heat — Themes identified in interviews

What are the challenges for reporting and producing stories on extreme heat?
Story narrative and context
• Negativity and "doom and gloom" reporting can cause readers to disengage (4/12) • Constant need for the "new and now" story with relevant angles that balance urgency with originality (3/12) • Level of audience capacity and interest is low for extreme heat stories, and further desensitization is possible as risks are normalized (2/12) • Coverage can reflect middle-class perspectives, portraying extreme heat positively, while underrepresenting at-risk populations (2/12)
Story reach and impact
• The Meta news ban has disrupted news dissemination, particularly in communities reliant on Facebook for real-time updates (6/12) • Limited resources, rigid approval processes, and generational differences within public health authorities challenge content creation (4/12) • Diverse audiences are not being reached due to lack of multilingual support, delayed translations, and local representation (3/12) • Misinformation, AI-generated content, algorithm-driven media, and disinformation challenge reporting and reach (3/12)
Access to data, information, visuals, and use of terminology
• Lack of timely access to experts or collaboration (5/12) and experts' use of technical jargon that is difficult to understand (2/12) • Visual storytelling of extreme heat is challenging due to limited and inappropriate imagery options; tight budgets and fast-paced reporting exacerbate these challenges (5/12) • Need for improved access to user-friendly, reliable health data and information from public health bodies to promote data-driven storytelling (4/12)
Organizational constraints
• Current media landscape creates time and resource limitations, staff turnover, and job insecurity that lead to understaffing and higher workloads (5/12) • Climate change attribution is still not prioritized, especially in time-constrained pieces (2/12) • Covering pre-season is difficult, as audiences primarily engage during extreme heat events (2/12)

Note: The number of respondents out of 12 is listed in brackets. As not all interviewees were asked directly about each specific theme, the number of respondents who mentioned a theme should not be interpreted as an indication of its overall prevalence.

The interviewees in a couple of instances noted that the lack of coverage on extreme heat is compounded by the risk that these events are becoming normalized as they become more frequent. The situation is further complicated by the fact that those with greater resources are increasingly installing air conditioning, meaning fewer people feel the direct effects of heat, which in turn may lead to reduced

public concern about the issue. Media reports and programming often still cover heat and hot weather with a positive, celebratory tone that overlooks the dangers for populations who are at higher risk of negative outcomes.

Story reach and impact

Half of the media professionals interviewed said that the Meta news ban created large challenges for disseminating local and regional news, especially in communities that rely heavily on platforms like Facebook for real-time information.

> *"[…] another major, major barrier that we face locally and nationally, is the Meta news ban. Northern communities very much still use Facebook. So, people get most of their information from Facebook and rely on that […] you don't really use other platforms to be informed."*

The interviewees highlighted in some cases that media outlets serving ethnically diverse communities face barriers in delivering timely, accessible information on urgent issues due to a lack of multilingual support and delayed translation.

> *"Also as mentioned, our listeners come from an ethnic background. So English is a second language for them, creating a language barrier. As a result, the contents of our stories must be more thorough and explicit."*

National media frequently overlook stories from northern communities, with centralized editorial control limiting coverage and local representation. Misinformation, AI-generated content, and algorithm-driven media were also reported by those interviewed as trends that can distort public understanding of complex issues like climate change, and disinformation from vested interests can skew public perception.

Access to experts, data, visuals, information, and use of terminology

When asked about challenges, some interviewees shared that there were substantial difficulties in finding diverse expert voices, particularly under tight time constraints. This leads to repetitive sourcing from familiar experts and limits new perspectives. They said jargon used by experts gets in the way of making climate-related reporting accessible.

"Regarding specific challenges faced in 2021/2022, given the high demand of timely information required and the mass volume of media requests at the same time, the wait period for any government officials to respond back to our interview requests was much longer than usual. Sometimes we only received their responses after a few days of sending requests for comments for interviews."

"A challenge in reporting on extreme heat and anything climate related, really, is the interviews, and actually getting the experts to speak in a way that is accessible."

Another major problem raised by some interviewees was the lack of access to health outcome data, including mortality data, from public health bodies. Inconsistent statistics across regions and challenges in sourcing reliable data can make accurate reporting difficult. The inability to access "paywalled" data from published scientific literature poses an additional challenge.

"We like to have good statistics, and we like to have the references for them too. So, one thing that always comes up is, for example, heat deaths. And heat deaths are measured differently everywhere […] As in what is considered a heat death?"

"Anything that's behind a paywall is not accessible to us – like journals that are behind paywalls. We rely very heavily on public institutions that publicly post their research and data."

"In general, the challenges that we face on a day-to-day basis relate to [not] being able to obtain accurate and reliable information from local, provincial, national and international sources."

Some of the interviewees also remarked that visual storytelling around extreme heat can be challenging because this type of weather lacks dramatic visuals compared with storms or floods. Journalists often have limited imagery options, due to tight budgets and fast-paced reporting. This leads to the use of visuals portraying “fun in the sun” or people sunbathing or cooling off by the water, which can trivialize the situation and create a mismatched framing of the story.

> *"I often find myself telling editors and other journalists like, you know, we're doing a hot weather story, please use pictures that are not fun, right? You want to show the discomforts associated with heat. I think the default is still, ‘Oh, great, it's hot, let's show people having fun at the beach.’"*

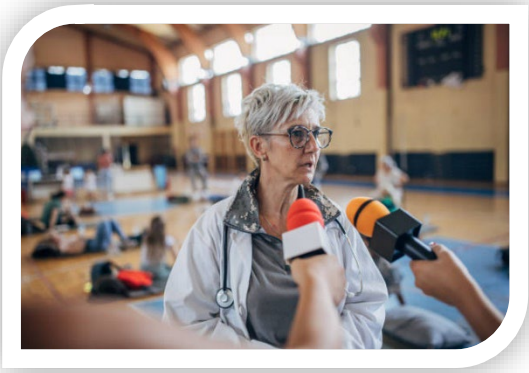
Organizational constraints

The interviewees in some cases shared that the current media landscape faces considerable time and resource constraints, with journalists often juggling multiple roles and severe time limitations, especially during periods of understaffing. The convergence of media platforms has reduced newsroom capacity across TV, radio, print, and digital, limiting the ability to provide consistent, in-depth coverage on issues like extreme heat and health. Added to this, connections to climate change are often overlooked in reporting, especially in coverage that needs to be published quickly.

> *Furthermore, as financial resources diminish [referencing closing of newspapers and news outlets], we identify increased challenges in the future.*

In a couple of instances, media professionals also said they face constraints to pre-heat-season reporting because audiences typically only engage during extreme heat events. Longer format documentaries or podcasts may accommodate some early coverage, but the daily news cycle favours stories responding to current or imminent weather, limiting proactive, seasonal reporting.

Potential solutions to improve heat-health communication



Several themes around solutions to improve heat-health reporting arose from the interviews. The themes (Table 3) relate to the following:

- Access to data, information, and resources
- Framing and narrative of reporting
- Training and education

Access to data, information, and resources

During the interviews, most media professionals suggested improving access to a regularly updated directory of diverse and responsive local experts, with contact details, availability, and regional representation to ensure timely and accurate reporting. Access to visuals and diversity of personal stories was also suggested to enrich reporting on climate and health-related events.

> *"Would it be possible for you to hire a photojournalist to create a set of images related to extreme heat that could be made available for public use?"*

Proactive support from public health communications teams through direct outreach or interview preparation can enable effective, consistent, and collaborative messages to be relayed to the public.

> *"Many journalists have to produce multiple stories in a single day, so if there's an upcoming extreme heat event, they need quick, reliable information they can easily draw from—something like, "Heat warnings are in effect, here's what you need to know."*

Table 3. Solutions for improving reporting on extreme heat — Themes identified in interviews

What solutions could improve reporting on extreme heat?
Access to data, information, and resources
• Streamlined access to local experts (e.g., via an updated directory), visuals, personal stories, and pre-emptive support from public health communications teams (7/12) • Provision of reliable, real-time data and simplified, easily searchable guides on heat-related information (6/12) • Information from public health should be shared in press releases and published on social media (4/12) • Providing a heat preparedness toolkit and actionable explainers like step-by-step guides as proactive, newsworthy resources (2/12)
Framing and narrative
• Avoid the "doom and gloom" narrative in favour of solution-oriented journalism that centres people in the story (3/12) • Focus on those at higher risk, the urgency of heat risks, and peer-networks (2/12), while telling local level stories (2/12) • Engage diverse, multilingual, and relevant audiences including Indigenous experts and those with lived and living experience (2/12) • Experts should avoid the use of jargon (2/12)
Education and misinformation training
• Provision of quick, reliable climate science resources, with support from communications professionals through workshops and webinars to help provide accurate, myth-busting information (5/12) • Counter misinformation through ethical standards, better correction mechanisms, and promotion of transparency, trust in science, and media literacy (2/12)

Note: The number of respondents out of 12 is listed in brackets. As not all interviewees were asked directly about each specific theme, the number of respondents who mentioned a theme should not be interpreted as an indication of its overall prevalence.

Half of the journalists and other media professionals that were interviewed also pointed out the need for reliable, real-time data, information, and resources to effectively report on extreme heat, and that these need to be made available in other languages. Access to simplified guides with well-tagged information via central, easy-to-search platforms for heat-related data could streamline reporting, improve public understanding, and better highlight health risks.

> *"An app or some sort of portal where information is centralized, searchable, clear, I think that is always really helpful. And access to people who can help us write the supplemental coverage that is important answering those questions, you know, what is a heat dome?"*

"Even just reminding people that a resource exists when it's suddenly timely and people are talking about it. 'Yeah, hey, you can find more facts about this here.'"

"Most of the emergency warnings provided by government officials are/were in English or French. One of the solutions for quicker and more effective outreach to ethnic communities is to provide material translated in more third languages."

The interviewees in some cases expressed appreciation for press releases from public health but raised that reaching audiences may require enhanced sharing through social media. This can be fostered by sharing timely, relatable content via influencers or local experts who resonate with specific communities.

The development of a heat preparedness toolkit or checklist, like wildfire emergency kits, was suggested as a pre-emptive, newsworthy resource for journalists to discuss and engage the public before extreme heat events occur. Service journalism can be assisted by actionable explainers, such as step-by-step guides or "Everything you need to know about…" guides, to translate complex information and help individuals and communities prepare.

Framing and narrative of reporting

Some of the interviewees emphasized that audiences respond better to people-focused stories that offer practical solutions or hope. Reporting should avoid "doom and gloom" in favour of local, personal narratives with contextual information, such as stories about the ways individuals and communities successfully cope with heat. This can improve credibility, relatability, and engagement with stories, while also communicating about who is at increased risk by highlighting factors like age, economic status, and disability. Using neutral, non-qualifying terms to describe weather was raised as an important approach – for example avoiding adjectives like "good" or "bad" when describing weather.

A couple of the interviewees also pointed to strategies such as engaging peer-led networks, especially in communities facing complex social issues like high rates of homelessness, poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness, and including people with lived and living experience in their stories. These approaches can improve outreach and make life-saving resources more accessible and relatable.

"…I just want to emphasize regarding resources that the peers themselves […] are such a great resource with lived experience and connections. …it would be key to engage those people."

In a couple of cases media professionals noted that the availability of a multilingual roster of spokespeople, including Indigenous experts, could help ensure timely, culturally respectful messaging across diverse communities. Experts should be encouraged and trained to communicate without technical weather terms, which can add to the complexity of messaging and make it more difficult for people to understand.

"And it comes back to regional storytelling – it works in community because there's more credibility and trust. I would say similarly, you know, having the right experts from Indigenous communities to be able to speak to this in a good way."

Training and education

When asked about solutions, some of the interviewees said they would benefit from access to resources that offer quick, reliable facts on climate science and how it links to extreme weather to enhance climate reporting and add context without appearing biased. Communications professionals can support these efforts by hosting workshops or webinars on critical public health topics related to extreme heat, providing journalists and the public with accurate, myth-busting information, and fostering more informed and nuanced coverage.

In a couple of instances, interviewees raised that public health and communications professionals can play a crucial role in countering misinformation by advocating for ethical standards. They can use transparent mechanisms for flagging and correcting false information or errors, and ensure that resources on vital issues like climate change are accessible and trustworthy. Rebuilding trust in science and promoting media literacy were highlighted as essential steps to protect communities and foster a well-informed public.

"And so, there's a piece here too, for communication professionals to sign codes of ethics to understand the consequence of not acting in a good way."

Summary

Interviews conducted with media and public health communication professionals participating in our study revealed several challenges to effectively covering extreme heat. These included difficulties keeping audiences engaged, balancing urgency with engagement, accessing data, reaching diverse audiences, and overcoming limited resources and the visually "unappealing" nature of extreme heat. The Meta news ban reduces story reach and can impede real-time public access to media coverage on extreme heat.

Solutions proposed by participants in the study included improving access to data, local and regional experts, and supporting resources to enhance accurate and timely reporting. Improving engagement and focusing on diverse and community-centric storytelling can help to ensure that solution-oriented messages reach those at higher risk of heat-health impacts. Improving collaboration between media and public health could deepen climate knowledge, counter misinformation, enhance media literacy, and foster a spirit of working together. These strategies aim to drive accurate, collaborative, inclusive, and engaging heat-health communication that resonates across diverse audiences.

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