

Security establishment not well-equipped to deal with environmental issues: team

January 11 2011, By Wendy Leopold

In a three-month investigation, a team of Northwestern University student reporters has found that the nation's security establishment is not adequately prepared for many of the environmental changes that are coming faster than predicted and that threaten to reshape demands made on the military and intelligence community. This is despite the fact that the U.S. Department of Defense has called climate change a potential "accelerant of instability."

The Medill School of Journalism graduate student team yesterday (Jan. 10) begins publication of its findings on the national security implications of [climate change](#) with a series of print, video and interactive stories at [global-warning.org](#). The first stories in the "Global Warning" series are running today in The Washington Post and on the McClatchy Newspapers' Washington website at [www.mcclatchydc.com](#), and were distributed to more than 600 other newspapers through the McClatchy-Tribune news service. Additional stories will run in coming weeks in The Washington Post. Both media partners are linking to the entire project online.

"Reporting from the Arctic Circle, Bangladesh, Peru, Washington D.C. and elsewhere, the Medill students deliver a well-reported and well-told examination of an issue that, while largely neglected by the government and the media, is fast becoming one of the most serious national security concerns," said Josh Meyer, who teaches in Medill's Washington Program. Meyer, the director for education and outreach of the Medill National Security Journalism Initiative, was a national security writer for

the Los Angeles Times for 10 years.

The 10 Medill graduate students interviewed more than 200 current and former national security officials and experts and reviewed scores of official documents and reports. While reporting, they used social media to create a community of people interested in the intersection of national security and climate change, informing them of their work through tweets, blog posts and an e-newsletter.

Among the project's findings:

- The government lacks critical information about where and when climate changes will happen and what effect they will have on the U.S. military, intelligence and national security communities.
- In a major strategy review last year, the Pentagon acknowledged the challenge that climate change poses to its operations, including a dramatically increased need for intervention in future humanitarian crises. While military branches have begun global assessments of their vulnerabilities, many security experts say the work lacks senior level support in Congress and the administration and that military service preparations are not keeping up with environmental changes.
- Work by the CIA and environmental scientists during the Clinton administration was largely ignored in the years of George Bush's presidency. Although the CIA is now spearheading intelligence assessments to determine where climate change could affect global stability, that work may be in jeopardy as Republicans skeptical of climate control take control of key congressional committees.
- The nation's satellite system, which provides the lifeblood of climate information, is in disrepair after years of inadequate funding and, in the past two decades, the intelligence community has struggled both

internally and politically to respond to the challenges posed by climate change.

- At home, critical infrastructure along the Gulf of Mexico is vulnerable to the stronger storms and more frequent flooding that are predicted due to climate change.

Stories in the series also explore how the U.S. defense and intelligence community is preparing for a melting Arctic, shifting disease vectors, altered glacial melt in the Andes and rising seas in South Asia.

In addition to traditional print and online pieces, the project allows audiences to explore the impact of climate change through creative interactive graphics that:

- demonstrate the impact of rising seas on domestic military installations;
- visualize the cascade of consequences that could turn climate changes into national security threats and crises;
- cast users as decision makers in a war game that plays out the consequences of climate change in four regional scenarios;
- convey the interrelated history of scientific findings, extreme weather events and political and defense policy as they relate to a changing climate through an interactive timeline;
- let users hear from the experts themselves and engage in the conversation; and
- provide an online library of dozens of government, academic and think tank documents related to climate change and national security.

“The imaginative use of interactive technology highlights Medill students’ advanced skills in presenting in-depth reporting in creative and entertaining ways that engage people and keep them informed,” said Professor Ellen Shearer, co-director of the Medill [National Security Journalism Initiative](#) and director of the Medill Washington Program.

The students learned sophisticated interactive storytelling approaches with the help of Kat Downs of The Washington Post and Nelson Hsu of National Public Radio.

Provided by Northwestern University

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