

3 Trends in Media Coverage



Had this past April been an ordinary April, the news media would have likely done its usual flurry of Earth Month—and Earth Day—coverage. Sustainability experts would have worked to achieve news coverage that explored progress to date and helped set the agenda for the future.

This year, however, April had a different distinction. In the U.S., it was the first full month in history that we lived with social distancing practices and stay-at-home orders in place.

COVID-19, not climate change, dominated the media.

This media coverage was met by a rapt audience: At the end of March, 92 percent of Americans said they were following coronavirus coverage very or fairly closely.

To satisfy Americans' appetite for trusted resources, real-time updates and a roadmap through uncharted territory, journalists and news outlets adapted their content to cover coronavirus-related stories almost exclusively. Thousands of angles, hundreds of spokespeople, tens of theories, one topic.

With this in mind, we conducted an analysis comparing sustainability coverage pre-COVID-19 and today. Additionally, we spoke with sustainability and CSR journalists for guidance on how industry advocates can continue to seek and obtain coverage in this vastly changed news environment.

We identified the following three trends.

1

The climate crisis is legitimately compared to the COVID-19 crisis.

Climate change and environmental topics remain of great importance to media, who have continued to report on urgent environmental news such as [coral bleaching](#), [droughts](#) and [threats to wildlife](#).

To plug into the COVID-19 conversation, reporters in this space are using the crisis as a cautionary tale for how climate change could bring forth similar consequences, calling this a “fire drill” or “stress test” for corporations. Bloomberg’s Emily Chasan said the current crisis has drawn attention to [the social consequences of climate change](#), while [Scott Breen](#), host of the “Sustainably Defined” podcast, said he was looking at “how we can take lessons from addressing this crisis to dealing with climate change and how the two are similar/different.”

The media has also reported on how the pandemic and resulting stay-at-home orders affect the planet. At the start of the crisis, the U.S. media reported on the [positive consequences](#) that stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders could have on the environment. Now, however, many outlets concede that while the

impacts of COVID-19 could benefit the environment in the short term, there are also negative implications, such as the rolling back of environmental protection regulations on [car emissions](#), [airline emissions](#), and [air and water pollution](#) in the midst of the crisis and as economies look to accelerate their return to growth.

From a business perspective, announcements about corporate efforts to mitigate climate change are still of importance to media. [Heather Clancy](#), [editorial director of GreenBiz](#), said she’s continuing to cover stories that will be critical for the long term and is highlighting which businesses are taking action. “Climate action is something we cannot afford to ignore, despite this short-term emergency,” she said.

Similarly, [Mary Mazzoni](#), [senior editor at TriplePundit](#), has said that the outlet’s reporting focus is still on the sustainability space. “We feel that crucial conversations around issues like climate change, environmental degradation and social justice have not become less relevant today simply because we now face yet another global challenge,” she said during a recent webinar.

2

Pitches to sustainability media need to be particularly compelling to break through the COVID-19 content.



In order for sustainability-focused stories to break through, aggressive targets, major corporate announcements and groundbreaking innovations are now, more than ever, a must. Through our audit and in conversations with media, we found that while many outlets have always been selective with coverage topics, due to the timeliness and urgency of COVID-19, the bar for non-COVID stories is now much higher across both trade and global outlets.

That includes Fast Company, where sustainability writer [Adele Peters](#) affirmed that she's most interested in major and innovative sustainability news. Stories need to really reach

a high bar," she said. In the outlet's "World Changing Ideas" series, she recently wrote about an [enzyme that recycles old plastic](#). She also covered Etsy becoming the first major online retailer to fully offset its shipping emissions and [wants other retailers to follow suit](#) as the logistics industry begins to change.

Brands should take note that sustainability angles need to be stronger in order to gain media interest, and they need to set a higher bar. Annual reports and new initiatives may not necessarily be prioritized unless they include ambitious goals and major news.

3

All CSR efforts and announcements will be assessed through a COVID-19 lens.

From the coverage we observed, it is clear media is keen on understanding how companies are reframing their sustainability initiatives with consideration of the global pandemic. In other words, CSR announcements cannot be made in silos and need to recognize the larger picture.

To start, there is a heightened focus on the companies pivoting their day-to-day business operations to assist with COVID-19 relief efforts, including by [creating much-needed personal protective equipment](#), [helping employees work remotely](#), using distilling facilities to [manufacture hand sanitizer](#) and more.

Additionally, reporters want to know what companies are doing to support

their people and communities. The coronavirus has created an urgent, unprecedented opportunity for CEOs and corporate leaders to put purpose-driven leadership and stakeholder capitalism into practice. It's for that reason, said [Leon Kaye of TriplePundit](#), that transparency and authenticity are more important than they've ever been. He told us the public is looking for thoughtful, meaningful leadership that speaks to a company's values and ambitions.

In this time of uncertainty and stress, reporters are also placing a priority on feel-good stories about those companies working to benefit people's lives and livelihoods. As a recent example, [Sustainable Brands highlighted](#) several companies that are

lending support to rural agricultural producers and their communities as the pandemic continues. And among corporations, those that have ensured employees' safety and well-being have been widely reported on, as well as those that have [promised not to lay off workers](#) in 2020 or have [offered their employees mental-health benefits](#). This coverage has also scaled up to include CSR initiatives that protect society's most vulnerable, including those companies that have stepped up to [help feed those at risk of hunger](#) and that have [protected front-line healthcare workers](#).

To both consumers and media alike, it's the people and companies striving to make a meaningful difference that truly inspire.

»» Looking ahead at future impact

While many businesses today face existential challenges and must endure endless debate about what life will look like in a post-COVID-19 era, one thing remains the same: The pandemic will press industries to make sure sustainability is authentic and truly connected to delivering value and meaningful change.

A [recent article](#) from Bloomberg posited that sustainability will “redefine itself in the COVID-19 era.” How will this affect the media landscape on the other side of this social and economic disruption? The jury is still out.



