

COVID-19's Impact on Sustainability: 3 Trends in Media Coverage

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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 dominated the media, not climate change.

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 Mazzone, 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 Triple Pundit](#), 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 who have stepped up to [help feed those at risk of hunger](#) and who 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.

About the Authors:



Ellen Mallernee Barnes, Vice President of Content

Ellen has managed editorial content creation and strategy for Havas PR's corporate, nonprofit and consumer clients since 2011, contributing her writing and editing skills to numerous award-winning campaigns across a breadth of industries. Always on-message and engaging, Ellen has drafted hundreds of impactful blog posts and bylines that have landed clients in the likes of Forbes, Fast Company, The New York Times, USA Today and top trade publications. Red Havas' clients have also come to count on her to develop long-form think pieces, such as white papers and research reports, and short-form social content that is crisp and compelling. And to build our clients' thought leadership profiles, Ellen has assembled hundreds of winning award entries and speeches. Ellen previously served as editorial director for Gibson Guitar and has a background in journalism.



Stephanie Clarke, Vice President

A founding member of Red Havas' Phoenix office with almost a decade of food and beverage experience, Stephanie is a savvy PR and marketing pro who feeds off going the extra mile to deliver the best possible results for her clients. Stephanie has led consumer programs for clients including AQUA Carpatica, Cervezas Alhambra, Fukushu Restaurant Concepts, Frost Gelato, Sauce Pizza & Wine, Revelator Coffee Company and Chef Dominique Crenn's Root Project, and her campaign for Risas Dental and Braces was shortlisted in the PRWeek awards. Within her first year at Red Havas, she increased media impressions for Phoenix's first client, Fox Restaurant Concepts, by 650 percent and was named to PR News' Rising PR Stars 30 & Under and as a PR Champion by the Council of PR Firms. Stephanie is a graduate of the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University and currently sits on the St. Vincent de Paul Advisory Board in Phoenix, lending her PR and marketing expertise to the organization.



Lesley Sillaman, Senior Vice President

Lesley joined Red Havas in 2006, and since then has been immersed as strategist, content and speech writer, media relations specialist and trainer. She manages the Havas PR Global Collective, coordinating its cross-border work with Havas teams around the world, including on the Kellogg's snacks and cereals business in EMEA. For Transitions Optical, Lesley launched the Transitions Adaptive Sunwear brand, and has introduced various new products with global brand names

like Oakley, Nike, Callaway, Bell and Shoei. She has also been the executive speechwriter for the company's annual flagship partner education event, Transitions Academy. For Sodexo, Lesley led the planning, messaging strategy and media outreach for the company's first "Quality of Life" Conference, an international symposium in New York. And for 10 years, she has led all media, content development and partnership initiatives for International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association. Lesley was named PR News' PR Professional of the Year in 2016. She received her bachelor's from the University of Dayton and her master's from the Annenberg School for Communications.



**Linda Descano, CFA[®],
Executive Vice President**

Linda is an executive vice president of Red Havas in New York. Linda specializes in providing strategic counsel on corporate communications, executive visibility, issues and crisis management, and Merged Media communications strategies to global corporations and organizations. Prior to joining Red Havas in 2015, Linda was managing director and global head of content marketing and social media at Citi; other roles during her tenure at Citi included president and CEO of Women & Co., the award-winning financial lifestyle community for women, and director and portfolio manager of the Citi Social Awareness Investment program. A PR News PR Professional of the Year and one of Campaign U.S. Digital's 40 over 40 honorees, Linda brings a unique blend of storytelling experience and investment acumen, complemented by work in B2B, B2C and B2B2C, giving her an uncanny ability to help clients create authentic

conversations and campaigns.



Deanna Tomaselli, Account Supervisor

Deanna has more than a decade of experience in consumer and B2B PR, marketing and social media in both agency and corporate settings. Throughout her career, Deanna played an integral role in social media, particularly content development, community management and influencer relations. She also has a proven track record for securing media placements. For Red Havas, Deanna solidified high-profile stories for clients such as NBC News and Self magazine. She works primarily on the International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association, Transitions Optical and LivaNova accounts, and helps manage the Transitions influencer program. Deanna is one of Pittsburgh Magazine's 40 Under 40 honorees and was named both Rising Star and Member of the Year by PRSA Pittsburgh. She's also been an active member of the PRSA Pittsburgh board for 10-plus years.



Audrey Arbogast, Senior Account Executive

In her four years at Red Havas U.S., Audrey has managed media relations, influencer relations, and social media efforts on behalf of consumer brands, expanding the agency's digital offerings for current and prospective clients. Current and past social media clients range from food and beverage products, to healthcare facilities, to a global climate summit. For these clients, Audrey oversees the social media strategy from ideation to execution, including managing budgets for paid social media tactics across platforms. Audrey's experience also includes developing influencer relations programs, securing authentic partnerships to create awareness, drive traffic, and increase brand affinity.