



From Headlines to Hashtags: Media's Role in Shaping Sustainable Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The position of media in digital communication environments remains essential for impacting how the public discusses matters while shaping how people see things and creating momentum toward sustainability tasks. Environmental and social sustainability issues obtain their current public reception through frames affecting policy creation and corporate responsibility across traditional outlets and social media platforms. This paper evaluates current media trends that develop sustainable messaging and explores headline and hashtag approaches for maximizing sustainability movement gains worldwide. The way media constructs its narratives upon environmental issues, climate change, and sustainable development is analyzed, through its diverse forms, including traditional news outlets, social media platforms, and citizen journalism. Further, we study the impact of framing, language, and imagery on public understanding, attitudes, and behavior. The research examines the good and bad that media can achieve toward sustainability, while focusing on the potential for "greenwashing" and the critical media literacy that would need to be developed. The rise of social media as a space of citizen engagement and activism is also examined as we study the influencers, online communities, and viral campaigns. The paper concludes with an assessment of the evolving relationship between the media and sustainability, highlighting the need for responsible journalism, innovative storytelling, and partnerships among media organizations, policymakers, and civil



society to communicate the urgency and complexity of environmental challenges and galvanize collective action toward a viable future. Moreover, the study further analyzes the issues of sensationalism, greenwashing, and media bias, which tend to cloud public understanding and hamper the possibility of significant progress. It also discusses the very power of citizen journalism and user-generated content in amplifying sustainability efforts beyond mainstream media. This paper merges insights from media studies, communication theory, and environmental research-determined to underscoring the need for responsible media practices. It advocates for collective action from journalists, content creators, policymakers, and the public as the antidote to misinformation, ensuring that media can become a catalyst for sustainable development. The research finalizes the endeavor of providing comprehensive insights concerning how the media shape sustainable narratives through headlines and hashtags, and how that can be harnessed more effectively to inspire real-world change.

Introduction

Sustainability has emerged as the problem of our time for the world, needing all of us, be it the government, the corporate sector, or individuals, to work together. The media based on different opinions-clipping, traditional and digital- will ensure better suggestions, form opinions, and launch action. The media propagates sustainable development and raises climate change and environmental issues in colorful headlines and virals, creating several campaigns for such matters. In the digital age, awarding Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have changed how we communicate through the media. With a new invention called hashtags-short, clickable phrases that garner together the similar posts-amplified the voices of individuals, grassroots movements and activist organizations. In the words of Castells (2012), digital communication enabled a transition from centralized to decentralized forms of communication. The audience is not in a passive mode, nor rise as a consumer; he produces and consumes simultaneously.

Most recent literature emphasizes the growing significance of digital media in constructing narratives for sustainability, especially in mobilizing and collective engagement-style actions, highlighting some of the



hashtags-from #ClimateAction and #FridaysForFuture to #SaveTheAmazon-that have served as rallying points for environmental movements across the globe. In Tufekci (2014), scholars discuss how social media has changed the landscape of collective action by opening doors for previously marginalized voices to speak up about sustainability. This democratization of media has enabled sustainability issues to become more diverse and inclusive, and accommodate a wider range of opinions and perspectives.

Digital media allows interactive and participatory narratives to develop. According to Hermida (2010), the role of media has shifted from pure broadcasting of messages to facilitation of dialogue. Social media allows discussions in real-time, live coverage of environmental calamities, and engagement with sustainability experts, advocacy, and activism. This paper focuses on the evolution of the media's role in sustainability, checking how traditional news outlets met with social platforms to provide narratives that resonate.

2. Literature Review

The basis of each media's perception of environmental affairs was mostly explained by the role of the media in informing and communicating climate change, suggesting how the media approached the discursive practices of framing the scientific process and how these influenced the intersection between climate science and policy. **M.: "Representing the Politics of the Greenhouse Effect: Discursive Strategies in the British Media"** looked into how investigation journalism has exercised power in holding the corporations and governments responsible in relation to sustainability issues, making a case that traditional media was a watchdog at environmental crises. However, they have also managed to identify problems inherent in traditional media. What is more, they maintain that exciting news stories about environmental issues have become a trend in order to get greater audiences, which has compromised the issues to silence; whilst traditional media being hierarchical means that the context of voices from marginalized communities generally finds itself at bay from assuming the media space where they are in fact the most affected against degradation in the environments. **Hamid et al. (2016): "Social Media for Environmental Sustainability Awareness in Higher Education"** noted the democratizing potential of social media. Twitter and Instagram give a platform to unheard voices and grassroots efforts. The authors studied how hashtags, including the likes of #ClimateStrike and #PlasticFreeJuly, have transformed into digital banners for the cause and created a sense of solidarity around the world for sustainability actions. **Koteyko et al. (2015): "Climate Change and 'Climategate' in Online Reader Comments: A Mixed Methods Study"** have shown just how digital activism hashtags like #ClimateStrike and



#PlasticFreeJuly have mobilized diverse populations in a united stand for sustainability. **Dahal et al. (2019): "Engaging the Public with Climate Change Through Visuals: A Mixed-Methods Study"** has said that Instagram strives to maintain its visual nature, thus allowing brands and activists to present engaging content in infographics and videos to help simplify complex environmental concepts into digestible formats. Interactivity on social media can also increase dialogue between brands, individuals, and decision makers, all leading up to higher engagement. **Lovejoy and Saxton (2012): "Information, Community, and Action: How Non-profit Organizations Use Social Media"** pointed out that real-time discussions provide a platform by which a user can disagree with, add to, or improve on the sustainability narrative sat at the other end of a computer screen. Recent studies have claimed that the most powerful sustainability campaigns occur on the intersection of traditional and social media, where the former provide depth and authority and the latter offers wider reach and high interactivity. **Schäfer (2012): "Online Communication on Climate Change and Climate Politics: A Literature Review"** is an analysis of the role newspapers and television are playing to open these talks about environmental matters already in social media. **Hestres (2014): "Preaching to the Choir: Internet-Mediated Advocacy, Issue Publics, and Climate Change"** examined the way in which traditional media and Facebook were synergistic during the Paris Agreement negotiations, demonstrating how both worked hand-in-hand to engage public support for international climate policies. **Thackeray et al. (2013): "Enhancing Promotional Strategies Within Social Marketing Programs: Use of Web 2.0 Social Media"** has shown how social media campaigns often rely upon credible content emanating from traditional outlets, using their authority to bolster public trust in the messages promoted. In a feedback loop in which traditional media galvanizes interest, and social media keeps the discussion going, public discussion remains active.

Objective of the Study

1. To investigate the changing roles of traditional as well as digital media in creating public narratives about sustainability.
2. The research is intended to study how media provide knowledge to the public, influence decision-making, and affect behavioral change in the area of environmental issues.
3. Also, such a study will investigate the role of communication techniques employed by the media, organizations, and activists in instigating awareness and inducing behavior towards sustainability.



How the researcher will conduct this study: a mixed-method methodology entailing qualitative as well as quantitative research techniques will be adopted.

1. Content Analysis: A systematic examination of articles, social media posts, and sustainability campaigns, to examine various sustainability communication framing and messaging strategies.
2. Case Studies: Selected successful sustainability case studies will be critically explored to find out the critical factors contributing to their effectiveness and impact.
3. Social Media Analytics: Trend in hash tags and engagement virtually will be analyzed to find out how digital platforms strengthen the discussion of sustainability and mobilize communities.

3. Media's Role in Shaping Sustainability Narratives

Framing of sustainability issues by the media through headlines or hashtags has major implications in how the public perceives and responds to these issues. Entman (1993) defined framing as the way the media selects certain aspects of an issue, making them more prominent and thus influencing how audiences interpret it. Sustainability issues are framed in many ways: crises that require immediate action, for example, climate change; as providing opportunities for innovation and economic growth such as green technologies; or as political struggles calling for systemic change such as environmental justice. Particularly, the treatment and discussion of sustainability by the media affect decisions made in policy and behavior. For example, Nisbet (2009) has shown that framing environmental problems in an apocalyptic manner can elicit feelings of helplessness in viewers, whereas framing them as solvable challenges provides hope and motivates action. On the other hand, when one uses product-consumerist-the lenses-especially of eco-friendly products-or language in talking about sustainability, there at times seems to blur the much more urgent need for systematic, structural adjustments that would address such concerns as climate inequality or environmental degradation.

3.1 Traditional Media's Role and Sustainability

In the past, traditional media outlets were generally seen as an important influencing force in shaping social values and political agendas in sustainability and the like. In their pioneering studies, Curran and Seaton (2003) described the role of media as gatekeepers of information. They indeed could influence which issues were defined as news and how they were framed.



However, traditional media framed sustainability too narrowly; it usually revolved around elite narratives focused on either top-down solutions of corporate or governmental solutions, hardly allowing room for grassroots voices or other narratives. There is also frequent discussion around "greenwashing" in the literature; for example, Delmas and Burbano (2011) have examined the extent to which corporations have sometimes allowed media to afford them a repute for sustainability even while not making any durable practices.

A good number of authors have also suggested that depending upon the traditional mass media, there was ever great agenda of the form-up taken to bring issues like climate change, deforestation, and corporate social responsibility into existence. They argue that traditional media coverage had been an important part in building urgency around the global sustainability problems. Some studies indicate that traditional media often sensationalizes environmental crises, which instead elicits public anxiety rather than constructive discourse (Carvalho & Burgess, 2005). Moreover, media bias, ownership interests, political affiliations, and more can influence how sustainability narratives are framed and disseminated. Headlines in major newspapers such as The Guardian, New York Times and BBC News often highlight pressing sustainability issues framed in ways that influence audience perception. A content analysis of news articles from 2010 to 2023 demonstrates that coverage moved away from merely reporting environmental issues to advocacy journalism in which news organizations have actively pushed for climate policies (Smith et al., 2023). Yet, media bias continues to be a thorny issue whereby certain publication downplay climate change owing to political or corporate interests (Feldman, 2016).

3.2 The Rise of Social Media and Digital Activism

Social mediasuch as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebookhas revolutionized storytelling around sustainability:

1. They enable the dissemination of information by granting access to anyone to speak.
2. Viral issues framed by hashtags, such as #FridaysForFuture or #PlasticFreeJuly, provide a megaphone for grassroots movements.
3. Actively engage with audiences through actionable material that is relatable and consistent with the intent. Social media democratized sustainability discourse being another voice that activists and citizens used to amplify their agenda. Some hashtags like #Climate Action, #Fridays For Future, and #Plastic Free July mobilized millions globally and



contributed to some important policy change. 65% of young adults aged 18-34 said they got their sustainability-related news via social media, which means this group is now the fastest-growing segment with news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2022). According to the X analysis, sustainability-related tweets more than doubled from 240% in 2015 to 2022, indicating an awakening worldwide. The advent of digital platforms, and in particular social media, has initiated a paradigm shift: Information dissemination regarding sustainability issues has taken a different turn. Social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have democratized information sharing so that organizations, activists, and individuals can create sustainability discourses in real time (Newman et al, 2019). This switch of transitioning from headlines to hashtags illustrates this transition. User generated content and creative campaigns may have influenced traditional media coverage. Separate studies show that activism regarding environmental protection is greatly mobilized through the internet and social media. Hashtags, such as #ClimateStrike, #FridaysForFuture, and #PlasticFreeJuly, propelled grassroots movements, which in turn encouraged the global audience to partake in sustainability initiatives (Mavrodieva et al., 2019). It also allows corporations and brands to promote their sustainability efforts to consumers, but it does not mean that misleading environmental marketing called "greenwashing" is not a challenge (Parguel et al., 2011).

Case Study: #FridaysForFuture

A movement has been led by Greta Thunberg, yet an online cry that translates real-world impacts. In excess of 10 million times being used on Twitter (X) under the hashtag #FridaysForFuture, it inspired youth-led climate strikes across 180-plus countries.

3.3 The Intersection of Traditional and Digital Media

The growing convergence of traditional and digital media transformed sustainability's narrative. Media institutions built on traditional paradigms identify social media's importance in facilitating public discussion and begin to extent their reports to include hashtags and digital memes. Mainstream media like the BBC and The Guardian, for instance, often append trending hashtags in their articles to extend their reach and connect with a younger and more socially aware audience. In this hybrid media environment, we see a meshing of the "top-down" messaging of typical mainstream media with the "bottom-up" storytelling being enabled by digital platforms (Jenkins, 2006).

Yet the articulation of these two different spheres creates problems. The rapidity with which information spreads in the digital sphere leans against the editorial checks of traditional media; thus the proliferation



of misinformation or, for lack of a better term, slacktivism (which refers to superficial or negligible online activism). Scholars like Gladwell (2010) argue that even though digital movements are characterized by their immense potential, the absence of institutional support and strategic direction makes them incapable of being effective in competition against traditional movements, and this leads to fractured effort.

4. The Power of Headlines and Hashtags

4.1 Headlines: Informative and Engaging

Headlines in traditional media play a key role in seizing public attention and addressing environmental issues as urgent and actionable. Examples include: In 2019, the international uproar over the fires in the Amazon rainforest. Major newspapers have given coverage to talks of the Paris Agreement, thereby launching a global discourse.

4.2 Hashtags: Mobilizing and Activating

Hashtags have become rallying cries for sustainability in the digital world. They enable: Global Mobilization: #ClimateStrike went viral worldwide and united millions behind coordinated action. Community Building:

Hashtags allow like-minded people to connect, swap resources, and coordinate events. Real-Time Updates: They capture live perspectives on environmental catastrophes and actions taken toward addressing them.

5. Case Studies

5.1 Greta Thunberg and #FridaysForFuture

This movement commenced by Greta Thunberg is an example of social platforms multiplying such sustainability campaigns led by youth activists like her. Thunberg's speeches were covered by mainstream media, while social media propagated the message globally through hashtags.

5.2 Awareness around the Great Pacific Garbage Patch

Documentary films and news articles from industrialized society informed the public about the issue, while campaigns such as #BeatPlasticPollution implored individuals to venture downstream to call for a plastic-free community lifestyle.



5.3 Corporate Campaigns

Brands like Patagonia and IKEA use both traditional advertising and social media to promote sustainability, blending headlines and hashtags to engage diverse audiences.

6. Challenges in Shaping Sustainable Narratives

1. Misinformation:

Corporations are growing media-as a means to create an impression of sustainability, often misguiding their consumers. Both old media as well as new-media are prone to misinformation and/or misleading narratives. Krämer and Schäfer (2020) highlighted that posts designed to virally propagate sustainability-related information may on occasions prioritize virality above truth.

2. Greenwashing:

According to a 2021 European commission survey, 42% of green advertising claims were found to be exaggerated or false. Further complicating matters are social media influencers and paid promotions that affect authenticity in sustainability messaging. The emergence of social platforms has encouraged a myriad of unverified claims and "green washing," through which businesses falsely advertise ecological practices for monetization. Socialmedia has also been called out for creating opportunities for corporations to engage in greenwashing, misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of their products or services (Parguel et al., 2011).

3. Engaging vs. Action Gap:

While hashtags promote online engagement, it is challenging to scale digital activism into actual action.

4. Media Bias:

In regards to climate change, news media tend to favor sensational rather than accurate reporting, affecting constituents' knowledge behind environmental issues. Fake news and misinformation about climate change are most rampant on digital platforms. A 2021 study by the Oxford Internet Institute indicates that misinformation about climate change increased by 30% during COP26, often politically motivated. Media literacy is the solution to these problems.



5. Fragmentation of information:

Though social platforms have enabled better content creation, they also bring on fragmented and inconsistent stories. Axford (2020) argues that the large amount of content on social media undermines the sense of urgency regarding sustainability issues.

7. Strategies for Effective Sustainability Communication

1. Clarity and Simplicity: Though often complex, sustainability justifies simplicity in its messaging. Avoid jargon or high-level concepts that would render the essence of the sustainability message lost. Relay the key points clearly and concisely to ensure various audiences can express the best points.

2. Storytelling and Emotional Appeal: This is another way of expressing engagement of an audience through an emotional connection. Adding real-world examples or stories about people or communities relating to environmental issues makes sustainability relatable and reaches the human heart. Success stories and experiences brought to light do inspire participation and commitment.

3. Visual Communication: Infographics, videos, and images convey complicated sustainability issues clearly and in a short manner. These have an edge as compared to plain textual communication because such forms of outreach and interaction not only engage an audience better but also have a better opportunity for sharing through other digital avenues.

4. Credible and Transparent Information: It's all about building trust in sustainability communication. Ensure that any claims made regarding sustainability have data and credible sources to back them up. You must actively explain your sustainability efforts, challenges, and progress because such transparency builds authenticity in your communication and creates public trust.

5. Targeted Messaging for Different Audiences: Different stakeholders-consumers, businesses, policymakers, and communities-all need some form of customization when building messaging. Knowing audience segments to understand the values and concerns of each and motivations direct communications toward meaningful actions among each targeted audience.

6. Engaging and Interactive Platforms: Social media, webinars, podcasts, and online forums provide interactive platforms for sustainability debates. Involving conversations and interactive elements, such as



Q&As and polls, allows the audience a voice in outrage and puts the establishing enthusiasm in the community.

7. Highlighting Tangible Actions and Solutions: The insights that can lead to action resonate better with audiences than with abstract problems. Conveying the ways achievable, the practical solutions to those problems, and showing progressive sustainable practice will stimulate both individual and corporate improvements.

8. Clear and Simple Messaging: The idea is that sustainability could be complicated. But incommunicating effectively, one needs to simplify the messages without losing the essence. Avoid jargon and ensure that clear and concise language is used, so that diversified audiences get the main points.

9. Storytelling and Emotional Appeal: Narratives anchor the heart of engagement. Sharing stories from the real world about individuals or communities affected by environmental issues makes sustainability relatable and impactful. They can inspire action and commitment and support human interest stories of successful outcomes.

10. Visual Communication: Visual communication can help breaking down big and complex ideas and narratives around sustainable development. Visual content is more engaging and shareable on social media which means that it helps to spread the word and keep people remembering sustainability messages for longer.

11. Credible and Transparent Information: Rights and trusted sources in sustainability communication is also critical. Data and credible sources must support all claims made. Also, be transparent about sustainability initiatives, challenges, and progress in order to establish authenticity and build public trust.

12. Targeted Messages by Audiences: Targeted messages are thus necessary for different stakeholders-consumers, businesses, policymakers-political and communities. Knowing each audience segment's values, developing tailored messages, and understanding what their concerns and motivations are will allow you to create messages that will engage them and lead to action.

13. Engaging and Interactive): Social media, webinars, podcasts, and online forums provide interactive platforms for sustainability discussions. It creates the desired interaction and integration of feedback through Q&A sessions plus polls and user-generated content.



14. **Shifting Focus to Actions and Solutions:** The human psyche is more responsive to actions than they are to problems. Practical steps, actionable insights, and illustrated benefits of our sustainable management and practices must be highlighted to inspire people and organizations to do something meaningful.

8. Recommendations for Responsible Media Practices

1. The media should present factual sustainability claims, statements, and statistics after thoroughly checking their veracity. This will help prevent the spread of undue misinformation to the public and will contribute to increased credibility of the particular media organization.
2. **Sensationalism:** Catchy headlines increase engagement, but it is very important for a media agency to make sure that it is showing clear, factual, and balanced reporting on a story of sustainability. Over-dramatization leads to confusion and reduced trust in sustainability plans.
3. **Comprehensive Representation:** Different communities are impacted by sustainability in different ways. It is very essential to include diverse perspectives, especially voices of marginalized and indigenous groups, in order to make the narrative more complete and inclusive.
4. **Solution-oriented:** Rather than focusing only on problems, media should be able to spotlight any real-life solutions, success stories, and actionable steps that audiences can take to advance sustainability.
5. **Disclosure of sponsorship and industry partnerships:** The partnerships and sponsorships with corporations need to be disclosed to ensure that media can hold up the banner of transparency. Such partnership disclosures help ward off the other appearance of the establishment of conflicting interests and instill an impression of public trust in the media content.
6. **Engaging audiences responsibly:** The ethical encouragement of public participation through social media postings, comments, or discussions must be carried out so that temperate dialogue continues. Moderating online material to avoid misinformation and hate speeches allows for more productive and respectful exchanges.
7. **Sustainability coverage:** Sustainability domains should not be treated as a one-time topic but that such discussions are always on and on-going. If sustainability gets regular coverage, the themes in eyes of the sustainability do get much air time rather than being swept under any carpet.



8. Collaboration with Experts: Journalists and opinion makers should work with scientists, ambientalists, and experts in policy in order to develop accurate, interesting reporting upon sustainability issues.

9. Conclusion

Through their headlines and hashtags, media platforms have become invaluable to sustainable narrative-shaping and environmental awareness. While traditional media can provide depth and credibility, social platforms can provide reach and immediacy. By tackling obstacles like misinformation and prompting cooperation, the media may act as a catalyst for sustainability. This is a rapidly evolving domain that throws divergent personalities into constant contradiction. Accordingly, future research may examine, for example, the impact of social media-driven sustainability campaigns in long-term settings, the role of AI in sustainability reporting, and ways to stay ahead of the curve when helping the general public become media literate.

By continuing on this line of inquiry regarding the influence of media upon sustainability narratives, scholars and practitioners will provision for stronger communication strategies that may forge a better-informed and engaged global public.

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