

Journalism for a sustainable future - Defining the principles and exploring the role of human centric stories

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Abstract

Journalism for a Sustainable Future - Defining the principles and exploring the role of human centric stories

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Sustainability is a multifaceted concept that encompasses the interdependent dimensions of environmental stewardship, economic development, and social equity. Effectively communicating this complexity to the public requires nuanced, context-sensitive storytelling that accounts for historical actions, current consequences, and future mitigation strategies. However, sustainability often does not align easily with conventional journalistic practices. This research-creation thesis developed and tested a pragmatic guide aimed at integrating sustainability principles into journalistic work. The guide is informed by participatory action research and a qualitative survey conducted with members of Concordia University's sustainability community. These insights helped identify key elements necessary for meaningful communication about sustainability in journalism. The guide was then applied in the field through the creation of audio and visual stories featuring two Concordia initiatives: Cultivation and Hive Free Meals.

While Bonfadelli (2010) observes that sustainable journalism remains marginal due to the often invisible nature of sustainability issues, this thesis argues that many tangible, solution-oriented initiatives exist and deserve greater visibility. Journalists have a responsibility to bring these efforts to the forefront, enabling public engagement and collective action. Our future depends on present decisions, and through intentional storytelling, journalism can play a transformative role in shaping a more sustainable society.

Keywords: Sustainable Journalism, Sustainability Communication, Journalism and Social Change, Sustainability Practices

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Chapter 1 - The Introduction

This thesis seeks to advance scholarship on the connection between a *sustainable future*¹ and journalism – an area some label sustainable journalism.

1.1 Sustainability and its role in the evolution of our civilisation

Sustainability is not a new concept to our civilization. Yet it is not always clear people understand that sustainability is not only about the balance between environmental protection and economic growth but also about social equity (Trudeau, 2018). Many scholars have defined sustainability and sustainable development but none of these definitions are universally accepted (Jabareen, 2008; Ruggerio, 2021). It is difficult to define sustainability as for some sustainability means environmental conservation and resource management and for others it means providing three meals a day to their family (Kenter et al., 2019).

Eric Cline (2021), in his book *1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed*, reminds readers that multiple civilizations all over the world collapsed in the late bronze age (from 1700 B.C to 1200 B.C) and one of the reasons for this was climate change. Cline (2021) has argued that climate change, along with other social and economic reasons, was one reason why the civilizations of Mycenaean (modern day Greece), Hittite (modern day Turkey), Mitanni (northern Mesopotamia) and many others collapsed around 1177 BC. This history resonates profoundly with today's time even though the events are separated by a couple of millennia.

Cline (2021) reminds us that “a perfect storm of calamities” in all aspects, social, economic and environmental, happened over the short time of a couple of decades in 1177 B.C. There was also a long megadrought during this period, which created food insecurity and forced socioeconomic systems to change with growing distress of the public (Drake, 2012). Although the effects of droughts had been affecting civilizations across eastern Europe and southwest Asia, Egypt was able to provide stable food for themselves and their neighbours. Evidently, the megadrought was also affecting the farming lands near the Nile, but Finkelstein et al. (2017) concluded that the Egyptian administration of Cannan had the foresight to understand the future

¹ *Sustainable future is used deliberately instead of sustainable development. Development as a term indicates undefined growth. This gluttony of growth can push us to defy the limits of our planet and its resources creating exploitative and extractive systems.*

requirements of the droughts and to plant and breed drought resilient food sources. Recognizing the need for change is a strong reflective theme of this thesis.

Peter Jacques (2021) in the book '*Sustainability - The basics*' brings us back to our time and the effects of unsustainable practices on our food systems. Jacques writes: "...food availability needs to grow enormously in a few decades [to feed the growing population], growth in critical crop yields are slowing, soils are degrading, biomass is being transitioned for energy (ethanol) instead of food, water availability is diminishing in many areas of the world, key inputs—like non-renewable phosphorus fertilizer—may be depleted between 2050–2100, while climate change is expected to reduce food productivity..." (p. 27). History has lessons to teach about unsustainable development and we have the means to a different approach to sustainability and to tackling climate change.

One development that was not a common commodity in our ancestors' lives was the ability to communicate information quickly. With the advancement in news systems and social media, how information is processed and dispersed has changed completely. While we face our own challenges in communication, such as falling levels of trust in journalism (Fink, 2019; Fowler-Watt, 2023; Urner, 2022), how we report on complex topics like sustainability to reflect the present state of the situation, while also taking into account past actions, is a topic in need of further study.

1.2 Current challenges of sustainability related journalism

Heinz Bonfadelli (2010) recognized that debate over what is sustainability is one key challenge in defining and refining sustainable journalism. Along with this challenge, Bonfadelli (2010) argues that various sustainability issues are often not visible in our surroundings, implying that the effects of unsustainable development can take a long time to show a visible difference in our lives. In addition to this, Bonfadelli argues the topic of sustainability is cross sectional and journalists have to consider the uncertain elements of past (unsustainable development or actions), present (consequences of the past actions and what can be done to mitigate the effects further), and the future (result of the mitigation plan), making sustainability extremely complex to report upon.

This complexity poses a challenge for journalists who will cover sustainability issues, where cultural context along with local relevance cannot be discounted while framing sustainability related stories (Das et al., 2009; Krauss et al., 2012; Spradlin & Givens, 2022). Many scholars have equally argued that a sustainable future can only be achieved through social equity and mind-set change (Wibeck et al., 2019), and on these bases, this research-creation thesis will argue that potential solutions to the problem of our sustainable future are impacted by non-effective communication.

The UN has clearly stated the important role of the media in supporting a sustainable future and in achieving Agenda 2030. This agenda comprises 17 different sustainable development goals (SDGs) ranging from creating gender equity to ending hunger but at the core these goals aim to provide social equity to the less fortunate, along with environmental protection and redefining development, so that socio-environmental balance is maintained. The UN has written that [“communicating together and advocating for the SDGs amplifies the power of the UN message worldwide”](#) (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, n.d.). Scholars have also agreed that the media influences the public’s perception of these issues, and that this perception is impacted by the way a journalist weaves their perspective into their stories and narration (Atanasova, 2019; Salathong, 2015; Spradlin & Givens, 2022).

1.3 The goal and purpose of this research creation project

1.3.1 The goal

Through this research-creation project, I aimed to better understand how journalistic pieces can communicate knowledge and information about sustainable practices in a manner which empowers and equips people to contribute individually to the sustainable future of our society.

The project focussed on the emerging academic concept of **sustainable journalism**, which Sundin (2017) defines as a practice that communicates challenges in ways that help societies evolve sustainably. Sustainable journalism is one way to communicate sustainability related information to help build an informed and resilient society. The goal was to first understand the current academic research available on sustainable journalism, and then with the collection of expert opinions on the topic, develop a clear guide for aspiring journalists to make better use of

sustainable journalism to report on sustainable topics. Lastly, this guide was tested through the creation of audio and visual journalism stories on Concordia's sustainable initiatives.

1.3.2 The purpose of this research

There are multiple purposes for this research-creation project - two purposes are academic and these are elaborated here, however some of the purposes for this research creation project are part of my personal belief system and they are explained in the later reflection sections.

A. Failure to understand the limits of our planet and the greed for something better

Reports have suggested that all developed countries have not been able to fulfill their commitment to reducing greenhouse gases (United Nations Environment Programme, 2023). This has created a need to understand what we are doing wrong to support the reduction of our carbon footprint and greenhouse gas emissions. Even though we've seen plenty of technological breakthroughs and policy changes around the world aimed at tackling unsustainable practices, most of them haven't led to the kind of real, lasting change we need as a society (Brough et al., 2020; Newig et al., 2019). This leads me to explore the idea that changing our consumption behaviour and addressing our cognitive biases might be the real barrier to moving towards a sustainable future. To achieve this, we as journalists need to change the narrative of sustainability. I have developed a guide for sustainable journalism that can be used to create sustainable stories, ultimately contributing positively to the public's perception of sustainability.

David Orr (2010) highlights in his book 'Hope is an imperative' the need to think beyond science based solutions for a sustainable future, writing "...deliverance will require more than astute science and a great deal more than smarter technology—both necessary but insufficient. Science can describe our situation down to parts per trillion and help to create better technologies, but it can give us no clear reason why we should want to survive, why we deserve to be sustained on Earth, or why we should worry about the lives or well-being of generations whose existence now hangs in the balance. That is, rather, the function of deeper senses that we catalog with words like morality, ethics, and spirituality." (p. 319 to 320). Answering the 'why' of sustainability can help build public understanding and help us work toward a common goal. Journalism needs to focus on

‘why’ and ‘what now’, more rather than ‘how’, to help in giving public context and purpose for moving towards a sustainable future.

B. To protect democracy and journalism:

Democracy is an important abstract principle that underpins the functioning of some modern societies. One of the primary duties of a journalist is to provide citizens with accurate and relevant information, enabling them to make informed decisions that uphold democratic values (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021; Lippmann, 1965).

Amanda Machin (2022) explores the relationship between climate crises and democracy, arguing that “climate change itself opens the opportunity to rethink the meaning, scope and value of democracy today and into the future”(p. 9). She introduces the concept of ***imaginaries***—shared visions of reality that shape political practices, orient expectations, and inform decisions. These ***imaginaries***, Machin (2022) argues, contribute significantly to our collective understanding of society and one could argue journalism significantly contributes to these shared visions. Kovach and Rosenstiel (2021) highlight that the purpose of journalism “has always been more of a service - a means for providing social connection and knowledge” (p. 14)., while Fischer et al. (2020) extends this concept to building shared understanding through the expectation “to convey content in an interesting, attractive, comprehensible and motivating way” (p. 1). Journalism, in this context, serves a parallel function by shaping, sustaining, and contesting these imaginaries to support the effective functioning of democracy.

William Connolly (1994) adds another dimension to the conversation by arguing: “A viable democratic culture would embody a productive ambiguity at its very center. Its role as an instrument of governance and mobilizer of collective action would be balanced and countered by its logic as a medium for the periodic disruption and denaturalization of settled identities and conventions” (p. xv). This definition not only reflects the dynamic nature of democracy but also parallels how sustainable development should function—constantly evolving, questioning, and adapting.

Many scholars have noted that the ambiguity and complexity inherent in sustainability are among the reasons for its limited appeal in journalism and public discourse (Atanasova, 2019; Berglez, 2011; Berglez et al., 2017; Bonfadelli, 2010). However, I argue that this very ambiguity demands a deeper engagement with the concept of sustainability. Communication, particularly through journalism, plays a crucial role not only in shaping public perception but also in equipping and empowering citizens to make sustainable decisions.

1.4 Research Questions

This research-creation project aimed to contribute to the emerging field of sustainable journalism by exploring how journalism can more effectively support sustainable development in a developed country such as Canada. Through a combination of academic inquiry and creative practice, this project identified journalistic strategies that both inform and empower individuals to engage with sustainability in meaningful ways. The following research questions guided this investigation:

RQ1: What are the key principles for a practical guide to sustainable journalism?

This question was examined through the lens of sustainability experts. A qualitative survey was conducted to understand how professionals working within the field of sustainability perceive journalism's current role and how they believe it must evolve to better contribute to a sustainable future. The responses offered valuable insights into the types of narrative shifts required, particularly the need to transition from problem-centric to solution-oriented reporting that actively empowers audiences to be agents of change.

The data gathered from the expert survey directly informed the creation of a *Guide for Sustainable Journalism* (see Appendix 2).

RQ2: When applying a practical guide to sustainable journalism, do facts and figures or human-centered storytelling have a greater impact?

RQ2 emerges from the need to evaluate the practical effectiveness of the *Guide for Sustainable Journalism* developed in response to RQ1. Specifically, RQ2 examines whether fact-based,

data-driven narratives or emotionally resonant human stories are more impactful when engaging with sustainability-related content.

RQ2 was indirectly addressed through the research-creation component involving audio and visual journalism stories highlighting Concordia University's sustainability initiatives. Rather than seeking direct responses from audiences, I sought to reflect on this question through lived experience, production challenges, and feedback from the surveyed experts. This reflexive process allows for critical engagement with the strengths and limitations of different journalistic approaches in sustainability reporting.

Together, RQ1 and RQ2 provide a foundation for understanding how journalism can serve as both a reflective and transformative tool in the pursuit of a sustainable future. While the first question focuses on the development of a practical framework, the second offers insight into how such a framework can be meaningfully applied in real-world storytelling contexts.

In the following sections, I explore the concept of sustainability and sustainable journalism, and examine the current role of communication in promoting sustainability.

Chapter 2 - The Context and Significance of Sustainability in Current Times

Sustainability has become a buzzword in contemporary society. Paul B. Thompson and Patricia E. Norris (2021) describe it as a "vogue" concept, noting the pervasive bandwagon effect: "Everybody is talking about sustainability" (p. 17). On the surface, this widespread discourse might suggest that society is steadily progressing toward a sustainable future. However, this assumption does not hold up against current environmental indicators. Reports on greenhouse gas emissions reveal that most G7 countries have failed to meet their commitments to limit emissions (UNEP, 2023), indicating a significant gap between discourse and action.

2.1 The Evolution of Sustainability

In 1987, the UN World Commission on Environment and Development published the Brundtland Report, defining sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Keeble, 1988). The report introduced three interconnected pillars: economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. These pillars remain central to contemporary sustainability discourse, though interpretations and priorities vary.

Foley et al. (2003) conceptualize sustainability as a system characteristic. They argue that to understand sustainability, one must account for the full range of resources—natural, human, financial, and manufactured—that sustain a system. Yet in everyday life, these inputs often remain invisible, resulting in ignorance, overconsumption, and cascading problems (Foley et al., 2003). A familiar example is single-use plastics: a seemingly trivial convenience that has become a major environmental burden requiring further resource expenditure to address (Rabiu & Jaeger-Erben, 2024).

Heinberg and Lerch (2010) reminds us that sustainability is not a modern invention. Many Indigenous cultures have long emphasized intergenerational thinking. For example, the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy urged leaders to consider the impact of their decisions on the seventh generation (Heinberg & Lerch, 2010). This perspective, rooted in cultural tradition, highlights sustainability as a value system embedded in collective well-being and foresight.

In contrast, Bonevac (2010) critiques conventional sustainability paradigms, describing many as ethically incoherent or economically naive. He argues that “sustainable growth,” (Bonevac, 2010, p. 86) when applied to material resources, is an oxymoron. While his pragmatism disrupts the optimism that characterizes much sustainability literature, it also raises crucial questions about the philosophical and political underpinnings of sustainability efforts. It also adds to the contextual complexity of sustainability as related to journalism that this thesis seeks to explore.

Others, such as Thompson and Norris (2021), frame sustainability as a measure of whether our current way of life can continue over time. Meanwhile, Jacques (2021) offers a more expansive definition, viewing sustainability as the continuous process of nurturing capable, accountable, adaptive, and just societies in balance with complex ecosystems. Jacques (2021) emphasizes the contradiction inherent in needing to consume while recognizing the damage consumption causes in a globally interconnected system. Given this complexity, I contend that sustainability should not be confined to a fixed definition. Journalists must understand it as a dynamic, context-dependent concept that evolves alongside society’s needs and values. It seeks balance—not stasis—and its meaning shifts depending on geography, culture, and historical moment.

2.2 My Perception of Sustainability

I define sustainability as the process of reimagining practices, systems, and relationships to provide long-term social and environmental equity alongside economic resilience for all living beings. It is a vision of a fair future grounded in the well-being of ecosystems. It requires not only technical solutions but also a shift in mindset—from extraction to regeneration, from individualism to interdependence. Given its deeply interdisciplinary nature, sustainability cannot be reduced to a single definition that accommodates every context. Instead, it must be treated as a plural and evolving framework for fostering just and viable futures. I see journalism as engaging with this definition because of the clear importance of the topic and the dynamic nature, and needs, of the field. Like sustainability, journalism serves multiple purposes, and different sustainability topics call for different forms of journalism to illuminate them. In our current moment, there is a pressing need for journalism to evolve with the changing times in order to meet the information needs of our society.

2.3 What is Sustainable Journalism?

Rooted in these evolving ideas, the term "sustainable journalism" was coined by Swedish media scholars Peter Berglez, Ulrika Olausson, and Mart Ots (2017). In their edited volume *What is Sustainable Journalism?*, contributors explore the dual dimensions of the concept. According to Lewis (2017), sustainable journalism refers both to (i) journalism about environmental and economic sustainability and (ii) journalism that produces enduring, socially useful information. Leung et al. (2017) argue that sustainable journalism extends beyond environmental reporting—it is also essential to the survival and renewal of journalism itself.

As mentioned, Sundin (2017) further defines sustainable journalism as **a practice that communicates challenges in ways that help societies evolve sustainably** (p. 151). Across these perspectives, a shared understanding emerges: sustainable journalism seeks to inform, investigate, and educate while aligning with the three pillars of sustainable development—economic, environmental, and social. Like sustainability itself, sustainable journalism is a plural and evolving concept. Most scholars agree that it should:

- Inform the public about sustainability challenges and crises;
- Empower the public with solutions to make informed decisions; and
- Operate in ways that are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable.

Building on Berglez et al. (2017), I argue that sustainable journalism must engage the public not only through information but also through narrative. It should equip communities with stories of possibility, resilience, and transformation, enabling them to imagine and enact alternatives to unsustainable systems. The focus remains on sustainability communication, rather than broader operational reforms within journalism itself.

The relevance of sustainable journalism is further underscored by evidence that developed countries, including Canada, have fallen short in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (UNEP, 2023). The United Nations and several scholars (Berglez, 2023; Bruggemann, 2017; Scheufele, 2013) emphasize the role of communication in achieving sustainability goals, yet critique current

journalistic practices for their limitations in this regard (Atanasova, 2019; Bonfadelli, 2010; Krauss et al., 2012).

2.4 Challenges Within Journalism

Journalism faces many challenges (Berglez et al., 2017) but in the context of this research-creation thesis, I will highlight two: lack of media trust and the sustainability of journalism as a business. How the broader academic literature discusses the specific topic of sustainable journalism is addressed in the next chapter.

Stiernstedt (2017) draws attention to the ethical risks posed by native advertising—a model where promotional content mimics journalistic content. He argues that this practice blurs the line between editorial integrity and commercial interests, potentially leading to audience disillusionment and misinformation (Stiernstedt, 2017). While native advertising is often justified as a financial necessity, it raises the question: can journalism remain ethically grounded if its survival depends on funding from institutions that may perpetuate unsustainable practices?

Picard (2017) reminds us that the sustainability of journalism as an institution has historically been tied to both press freedom and economic viability. He argues that effective communication remains central to human flourishing and to addressing local and global challenges (Picard, 2017). Despite differing emphases, both Stiernstedt and Picard underscore the urgent need to reimagine journalistic models for a socially sustainable and democratic future.

This tension invites a deeper question: Should we focus on transforming the structure of journalism itself, or on fostering stronger ethical and civic commitments among journalists? Either way, the context provided above points to a clear imperative to rethink how journalism operates in light of contemporary sustainability challenges.

Although sustainability is not widely discussed in the context of journalism, the sustainability of media has been a longstanding challenge since the digitization of news. This research-creation project was not designed to directly resolve these challenges; however, they were kept as a background consideration while addressing the research-creation questions. The final product of this project, the practical guide (see Appendix 2), highlights some potential solutions and aims to provide sustainable approaches to these challenges.

Chapter 3 - Toward a Sustainable Journalism Practice (Literature Review)

Sustainable journalism is a relatively new subject in journalism studies, being only coined as a term in 2017 (Berglez et al., 2017). But there are several wider themes in the literature that are important to this topic, which are discussed below.

3.1 Challenges of sustainability related communication

Time and again scholars and sustainability ambassadors have reminded us of the importance of the media in cultivating peoples' perspectives on different social issues and in working towards social transformation (Bonfadelli, 2010; Happer & Philo, 2013). Donsbach (2014) has credited the success of some social changes to a common understanding of the subject. This is relevant here since there is no clear definition of sustainable development and no common understanding of sustainable journalism, thereby posing a problem for scholarship on the topic.

This issue goes deeper. Not having a clear definition, motivation, and/or goal for a subject not only makes the subject more confusing but also hinders the formation of public perspectives fueled by common understanding (Fowler & Gollust, 2015; Nisbet & Fahy, 2015; Scheufele, 2013). On a broad level, Scheufele (2013) argues that inadequate science communication hinders the advancement of science, as it leaves the audience wondering about the importance of an advancement for society. Nisbet and Fahy (2015) further explore these issues as related to the room for misinterpretation or miscommunication of a topic, which they link to the politicization of environmental news (among other issues such as the cuts to science reporting staff). Nisbet and Fahy (2015) argue that politicizing the news creates a conflict narrative of one versus another, undermining the importance of the topic at hand. They write "these conflict narratives also undermine overall public trust in experts and government officials and reinforce public cynicism about whether a problem can ever be resolved" (Nisbet & Fahy, 2015, p. 225).

Added to this lack of common understanding, some argue that the interdisciplinary nature of sustainability makes the communication of the topic (and thus sustainable journalism) even more complex (Bonfadelli, 2010).

Although the argument about lack of common understanding is completely credible, we cannot overlook the fact that on a broader level sustainability is all-encompassing - all systems, natural and man-made, affect every living being in their day to day lives, both for short term and long term needs and wants (Fu et al., 2022; SARAS Institute, n.d.). Along with this, the context of sustainability changes according to one's socio-economic standing (Kirsten & Eligius Biyase, 2023). Personal beliefs and value systems should also be accounted for when discussing sustainability in an individual or community context. This provides us with an opportunity to treat sustainability and by extension sustainable journalism as a living system which changes with cultural, economical, environmental contexts and need of the hour.

The lack of common knowledge can therefore be considered both a challenge and an opportunity – sustainable journalism need not be treated as inherently ambiguous, but rather approached as requiring a ‘flexibility of the subject’. This is not to suggest that scholars pointing to ambiguity (Bonfadelli, 2010) are mistaken—ambiguity or the lack of a clear definition can indeed lead to limited public understanding (Nisbet & Fahy, 2015). However, it also means that the challenges of sustainable journalism are inherently complex and multifaceted, reflecting the nature of the topic itself.

To communicate sustainability-related information effectively to the public, communicators must bring not only their perspectives and opinions on the subject but also a strong interest in and broad knowledge of the field. The narrative should shift from seeing “ambiguity and complexity” as barriers to public understanding toward recognizing them as signs that there is more to learn, explore, and communicate.

3.2 Four themes for development of sustainable journalism

Nevertheless, scholars have agreed upon the importance of a few themes in the literature when it comes to the effective communication on sustainable development: (1) the importance of cultural and local context in a sustainable journalistic piece; (2) the importance of framing; (3) the need for the art of storytelling; and (4) the potential of solution-based approaches rather than just informing people about the crises. These themes are briefly discussed below and helped to inform the selection of key principles for a practical guide to sustainable journalism.

3.2.1 Theme 1: The importance of cultural and local context in a sustainable journalism piece

In today's world, Western society is well aware of the problems related to sustainability and we as a society still continue to practice unsustainable habits (Atanasova, 2019; Nicholson-Cole, 2005). It's not that the media has not communicated the importance of sustainable practices but that we do not see the immediate consequences of our actions (Bonfadelli, 2010) or face any drastic, direct impacts of our action and therefore ignore the urgency of the matter (Nicholson-Cole, 2005). Berglez (2011) explains this by writing: "The basic problem, when it comes to style, is that the climate issue only exists in the form of scientific prognoses and gradual tendencies, and not as 'real' events" (p. 457).

One potential solution to this issue is to foreground cultural and local context. Scheufele (2013) explains that there is an important relationship between media trust, audience engagement, and cultural and local context. Scheufele (2013) notes that audiences deal with thousands of pieces of new information everyday and to avoid dealing with storing and analyzing this new information on a regular basis, we tend to actively pay attention to information that is easily comprehended and relevant to our lives and surroundings. This pushes audiences to select and consume journalistic pieces that are context and culturally specific to them. Consequently, as Bonafedli (2010) and Berglez (2011) have pointed out, without this local context, sustainability issues may exist only in the minds of people as a scientific prognosis (without direct experience of change), and never as a real and drastic event. Urner (2022) writes "The human brain always links new information with already existing memories and neural activity patterns, so that simple storage and deletion like on the hard disk of a computer is impossible" (p. 94).

For example, Das et al. (2012) highlight that cultural differences can play a part in the reporting of certain topics, and that research about sustainable development (as related to news coverage) should not be done without addressing the cultural value of the region. Das et al.'s (2012) work is on environmental journalism in Bangladesh, where reporting on sustainability is not only viewed as an ecological issue but also reflects the social, economic and political contexts of the matter in almost all publications. Bangladesh is the ninth most natural disaster-prone country in the world (World Risk Report 2023). Residents of Bangladesh are often affected by a number of natural disasters, including floods, drought, salinity intrusion, cold waves, riverbank erosion, and thunderstorms. Bangladesh is also a global hotspot for tropical

cyclones due to increases in sea surface temperature (Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Bangladesh, 2020). These conditions make climate change a pressing subject for the people of Bangladesh and this is reflected in the kind of media accepted by the public there, where cultural and local relevance plays a major role in journalism production.

The role of narrative is also important. Fischer et al. (2022) explain the use of cultural context in narrative structure and establish that using narrative structure affects the cognitive and conative abilities of the reader. I would argue that by extension the cultural demographic of a person will affect the way sustainability related news is consumed and reflected upon. Fischer et al. (2022) further state: “[s]tories serve as archetypal frameworks for humans to interpret and assimilate complex thoughts (Sugiyama 1996). This fundamental connection between our perceptual capacity and stories offers the opportunity to capture attention, reduce the cognitive effort required for reception, and provide the means to overcome cultural barriers” (p. 20).

3.2.2 Theme 2: The importance of framing for sustainable journalism

Media framing is explained by scholars as the perceived understanding of a news topic by the audience (Nisbet et al., 2003; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Scheufele, 1999) Scheufele (1999) explains that media framing has multiple functions, including an “impact on attitudes, opinions or individual frames” (p. 110) when receiving news. Pan & Kosicki (1993) add that an audience's understanding should not be considered an independent entity but as a part of the news media discourse process. The way the audience perceives news frames may impact collective action and the building of shared knowledge in society. Therefore, Pan & Kosicki (1993) argue media framing is a device for audiences to connect the dots and view a bigger picture. Nisbet et al. (2003) also highlight how media framing “influence the attention of competing political actors and the public but the media also powerfully shape how policy issues related to science and technology controversy are defined, symbolized, and ultimately resolved” (p. 38).

Importantly, for this project, Nisbet et al. (2003) note that how the media frames an issue can affect people's opinions for good. For example, Spradlin and Givens (2022) studied the impact of framing on the public's perception of sustainability in a case-study of climate change in three mountain towns in the Intermountain West of the United States. Using a frame analysis of three local newspapers (Park Record in Park City Utah, Summit Daily in Summit County Colorado and

Jackson Hole News & Guide in Jackson Hole Wyoming), they found that the reporters who took a personal tone when talking about the impact of climate issues on the community and businesses, impacted the perspectives of their audiences positively. This resulted in community action taken towards climate change. In an alternative example, Feldman et al.'s (2012) examination of climate change coverage on major American cable news channels showed that "Fox News promulgated a more dismissive view toward global warming, which was likewise shared by its audience...thereby amplifying doubt about global warming" (p. 23).

Urner (2022) points out that sustainable technology and tools have existed for a while in our society, however adaptation of these technologies and tools are a challenge in our society. This challenge can be addressed by storytellers as they have the power to change narratives and equip and empower the audience to adapt to these changes. Urner (2022) highlights that as storytellers we have to understand the audience and frame the stories in a way that is beneficial to our audience. This connects to the role of narratives in theme 1.

However, narratives can be misused as well. Objectivity has been a core principle of journalism, however, the use of objective reporting can be rooted in the politicization of stories. Nisbet and Fahy (2015) have explained the need for moving away from politicization of environmental reporting, where the use of conflict narratives has been linked to challenges. Urner (2022) further explains the need to surpass the notion of objective reporting, and its relationship to the economics of journalism businesses, writing: "if we as a society ensure that journalism is not financed by special interests such as political parties or companies can we open the path to constructive reporting...This turning point begins with the realization that as there is no such thing as objective reporting we need to better understand how recipients process information" (p. 98).

Atanasova (2019) provides another perspective on this issue. Atanasova (2019) points out how media framing of sustainability is linked to consumerism, and particularly, the solution of green consumerism. However, she suggests green consumerism does not provide a sustainable solution and is not inclusive as green products often cater to a rich populous. Atanasova (2019) sees communication on sustainability as embedded in the power of science and the power of the market, writing that this "limits the options for challenging the status quo of consumerism

and the range of solutions that can be reported” (Atanasova, 2019, p. 701). This also limits the value of camaraderie and shows how current sustainability journalism may focus too heavily on the frames of science and economics, and too little on social issues.

These media framing issues extend to the perspectives journalists hold. For example, a qualitative study conducted amongst Nigerian journalists, where they were asked about their perspective on Agenda 2030 and sustainable development, showed that these journalists understood that reporting on the 17 goals set by the UN is important, but that they did not see the importance of having their own individualist perspectives on these topics, nor the importance of sustainable development in general (Obateru, 2021). Obateru (2021) makes the argument that these journalists' perspectives will impact their audiences.

Bonfadelli (2010) points out that even though sustainable development related communication may not be up to the par in some news rooms, the public still relies on established media for information on these topics. This indicates the importance of framing for sustainability journalism. Indeed, looking at the Spardin and Givens (2022) and Feldman et al. (2012) studies, the link between the approaches taken by media outlets, as well as various media frames that do not hold public interest or keep audience well-fare in mind, can lead to a chain of misinformation and distrust (Nisbet & Fahy, 2015; Scheufele, 2013). Thus, different scholars have suggested that media framing plays a crucial role in forming public beliefs and collective action on this topic of sustainability.

3.2.3 Theme 3: Storytelling as a tool for sustainable journalism

UNCED has described public participation as a fundamental prerequisite for achieving [Agenda 21](#) and by extension [Agenda 2030](#). This concept is also agreed upon by a handful of scholars (Fischer et al., 2022; Molthan-Hill et al., 2020; Sundermann et al., 2022), and Molthan-Hill et al. (2020) in particular, argue that sustainability is a multidisciplinary concept, where the lack of community input across the different disciplines that study sustainability, is a potential reason why it has been difficult to have effective systems of communication on sustainable development.

The lack of effective communication is a key point for this thesis, one where Bonfadelli (2010) reminds us that stories on sustainable development are about the depletion of shared natural resources and the impact of development as a collective phenomenon. As noted in Theme 2, this makes sustainability a social issue rather than a development or political one (Bonfadelli, 2010). Building on this theory and Theme 2 above, the communication of sustainable development should also be considered a social issue, one where the audience is encouraged to be part of the solution (Sundermann et al., 2022).

Sundermann et al. (2022) explain that millennium development goals and the Paris Agreement are based on the perceived participation of civil society members who have the needed knowledge, willingness, and required skill sets to be part of the sustainable transformation of our society. Sundermann et al. (2022) highlight that this kind of transformation requires a change in the narrative – one where sustainable progress should be communicated in a way which is easily understandable. Storytelling should be vivid to reduce the fear of dynamic change amongst an audience. The authors further argue that communication for sustainability should not be solely complex factual information but should reflect the emotional impact of the issue (Sundermann et al., 2022).

Research by Rogener and Wormer (2017) on risk reporting in science journalism provides an illustrative example, where scientists, professionals and journalists can give a lot of attention to factual information and fact checking, but ignore or are not unanimous on how narratives should be used. On this point, various scholars have highlighted the potential role of constructive journalism² in sustainability stories. They highlight that having a solution-focused story and creating a hopeful future narrative can further encourage the public to be part of sustainable change (Atanasova, 2019; Salathong, 2015; Urner, 2022), which echoes Sundermann et al.'s (2022) call for this focus on public inclusion. Urner (2022) has repeatedly argued that retaining emotional content is impactful for people, giving the example of how people can vividly recall what they were doing during events such as 9/11. Bruner (2011) establishes that one can remember facts that are part of the stories 22 times better compared to stand alone facts.

² In this thesis, I mention both constructive journalism and solutions journalism as ways of reporting on sustainability issues. Constructive journalism is an umbrella term for journalism that takes a positive approach, focusing on possibilities and resilience instead of only the problems. Solutions journalism is a type of constructive journalism that specifically frames stories around responses to challenges, showing how people or communities are working on solutions and how effective those solutions are.

Research by Borgen-Eide (2024) shows the choice of narrative can influence how an audience perceives climate change stories. Borgen-Eide (2024) found that when a 'what if' scenario is added to a story to highlight the future consequence of an unsustainable practice, the engagement is higher from the audience. She highlights that cognitive estrangement might be one way to engage an audience to stimulate "contemplation on the status quo and ultimately may have transformative potential" (Borgen-Eide, 2024, p. 1). She encourages the reader to use 'tipping points' as a tool to amplify the consequences and highlight the need for a sustainable future in journalistic stories. (Borgen-Eide, 2024)

Overall, the history of storytelling as a tool to communicate dates back to the pre-civilization era (Armstrong, 2021). While not new, Fischer et al. (2022) explains that sustainability-related storytelling needs to pursue specific goals and use "very specific approaches to complex and knotty (wicked) sustainability challenges" (p. 14). For Fischer et al. (2022), this includes engaging "people with these complex problems by involving them in producing possible solutions" (p. 14). In this context, the role of sustainable storytelling, and thereby sustainable journalism, is to help people adapt to current and upcoming challenges. They argue that this type of storytelling helps explain the moral-ethical issue of sustainability and gives an audience a chance to understand multiple perspectives and thereby broaden their own perspective (Fischer et al., 2022).

3.2.4 Theme 4: The potential of solution-based approaches to sustainable journalism

Numerous scholars suggest that a constructive and solution-based approach should be used while reporting on the varied topics related to sustainability (Atanasova, 2019; Berglez, 2023; Sundermann et al., 2022; Urner, 2022). Steve de Shazer famously stated "Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions" (as cited in Urner, 2022, p. 92). Urner (2022) argues that negative narration or only reporting on the issue can create a state of learned helplessness, especially in situations where there are unsolvable issues at hand. The issue of sustainability is complex in nature and can provide an illusion of an unsolvable problem as the progress is not visible quickly and can sometimes take decades or a lifetime to see the change, creating an illusion of stagnancy or unsolvable problems. A solution oriented approach can promote future oriented thinking and action, mentioned as a prerequisite for a sustainable future.

Berglez (2023), in particular, argues for how a solution-based approach can be one of the solutions for the effective communication of Agenda 2030. He suggests that “the importance of journalism as a public good in times of SD challenges could be further explored and developed” (Berglez, 2023, p. 2), going so far to write that “sustainable journalism (SJ) should become an important co-solution to the goals as they currently stand” (Berglez, 2023, p. 2). A focus on solutions journalism has emerged in other areas of news production (Solution Journalism, 2020), where arguments exist that it can provide both (i) tools to the public to make informed decisions and (ii) encourage people to get involved. Berglez (2023) proposes ten principles to allow for an effective sustainable journalism story, stating that if journalists identify relevant initiatives/ solutions/ innovations, along with identifying the people behind these initiatives/ solution/ innovations, it is more likely these items will become newsworthy.

Atanasova (2019) further argues that news on sustainability should use a constructive journalism approach: one where a piece of journalism not only answers the five W’s but also asks the question of ‘what now’? This approach encourages a journalist to not only report on the issue but also give the audience potential solutions or at least a sense of what should happen next (Atanasova, 2019). Urner (2022) explains that the role of constructive journalism is to better justify the core task of journalism (i.e., to provide socially relevant information so the public can make informed decisions). Urner (2022) expands on Atanasova (2019) to write “[w]hen the what-now question is answered collectively, it is not part of a journalistic trend but a fundamental responsibility in a democracy” (p. 98). For Urner (2022), the fundamental point of a constructive approach is to change the perception of a topic and reflect on how this can enact progress by asking a ‘what-now’ question.

This can be seen to counter what Fowler and Gollust (2015) call the use of conflict narratives in science-related news, which can undermine the overall trust in experts, government officials, and communicators of these topics, as well as lead to the public wondering about how to resolve the problem or to lose hope. Sanal and Aram (2023) think a constructive approach in environmental reporting can help negate hopeless feelings that are generated due to an apocalyptic narration of environmental stories. Indeed, one can theorize that a constructive journalism approach could give new hope to audiences and also motivate them to create a positive change in their perspective for a sustainable future. Holliday (2019) argues that individuals who are more conscious and receptive toward environmental issues are better able

to incorporate inspiration into their practices. Sanal and Aram (2023) point out that this kind of approach can help journalists undertake transformative narratives in their reporting.

In summary, this literature review suggests a change is needed in order to form sustainable systems that include our media systems. Fung and Weder (2025) suggest that a journalist's professional approach has to change in times when crises become a daily part of one's work (Fung & Weder, 2025). Obateru (2021) argues further that a journalist's own opinions and perspectives are crucial when reporting on sustainability issues. Fung and Weder (2025) summarize this in writing: "communication and journalism [is viewed] as transformative practices, involving the construction of public discourses, negotiations, and sense-making processes, enables us to capture shifts in normative frameworks and explore emerging communicator role perceptions" (p. 371). There is an acute need for not only narrative transformation of sustainability but also a shift in the perspective of journalists reporting on the topic.

3.3 My inspiration from the literature

The literature on sustainable journalism inspires me to explore how giving equal, to substantially more, importance to solutions can help us gain back audience trust and restore the hope we all seem to be losing for future generations. But more clarity is still needed to achieve this research goal.

I have been inspired to do this research-creation thesis due to: (a) my personal connection to nature and its importance in my life, (b) to help others harness a passion for the subject, and (c) to use my knowledge and skills to advance a project and topic that can make a difference. Rogener and Wormers (2017) write that the quality of environmental journalism is not seen as a priority for news networks around the world, and this affected me. I believe that if journalists see the urgency of sustainable journalism for the sustainable future of the society, this can result in change. We need to become more conscientious about how we frame journalistic pieces for our sustainable future.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

Researchers in the field of sustainability can perceive our reality as the reality of the majority of other people, which can lead to proposing solutions that might not work for everyone. I believe in the principles of participatory action research (PAR), and in my opinion, we should get people involved in the solution finding process with a pragmatic approach. This might not guarantee a solution for everyone, but it can provide a more diverse perspective on the issue at hand, in our case unsustainable development.

4.1 Pragmatic and Participatory Action research (PAR)-inspired methodology application

This research creation thesis was inspired by a pragmatic central worldview. Creswell (2014) describes pragmatism as an application oriented worldview. The author points out that in pragmatism “[t]ruth is what works at the time” (p.11), adding that unlike other worldviews, pragmatism does not treat reality independent of the mind. It is further emphasized that in taking a pragmatic approach to a research problem, it is important to take a pluralist worldview to “drive the knowledge about the problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 10) and to recognize that pragmatism is not about seeing the world through absolute truth, but finding a solution that works in the present reality. For this project, this translated to achieving a ***goal-oriented solution to the problem of how to better utilize sustainable journalism***.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, both Berglez (2011) and Krauss et al. (2012) have expressed a concern that contradictory information provided to the public can create distrust and leave people questioning the importance of sustainability in the current times. This and other issues may have a pragmatic solution in the form of sustainable journalism, but this has yet to be articulated into journalistic practice or a practical guide that might help to address these concerns or at least test their usefulness. One key focus of this project was to understand how sustainable journalism can engage the public and inspire them to be part of the change, which was explored as inspired by approaches to participatory action research (PAR).

PAR is an approach where experiential knowledge is used to identify and give real world solutions to a systematic problem (Cornish et al., 2023). Cornish et al. (2023) explain that one

goal of PAR is not to generate knowledge for scientific progress but to advance knowledge for action and knowledge through action. PAR projects are concerned with providing solutions by taking into consideration what the community needs (Cornish et al., 2023) through communicating with that community. The goal for this project was to advance strategies for sustainable journalism with the community of Concordia, through reporting on their sustainability efforts and the mindsets of people contributing to sustainable practice at and around Concordia University. This was hoped to allow for the project to have a well rounded perspective on Concordia's sustainability communities.

Theoretically, this research creation thesis was inspired by four key principles of PAR:

1. The importance of authority derived from direct lived experience was central to this research. This was applied through the survey and interviews conducted with members of the Concordia sustainability community (RQ1 and RQ2).
2. Creating knowledge from action was another guiding principle. The process of engaging with academic literature, analyzing survey responses, and conducting interviews informed the development of key principles for a practical guide to sustainability journalism (RQ1).
3. Undertaking research as a transformative process was integral to the project. The creation of the guide (RQ1) and its application within the Concordia sustainability community (RQ2) aimed to shift the narrative of sustainability, illustrating how audiences can actively contribute to this change. This approach fostered transformation both for me, as the researcher, and for those involved in the study.
4. Collaboration through dialogue also shaped this work. As Cornish et al. (2023) note, "PAR's power comes from harnessing the diverse sets of expertise and capacities of its collaborators through critical dialogues" (p. 2). By drawing on qualitative data from sustainable communities (RQ1) and producing journalism for broader audiences (RQ2), this research emphasized collaborative dialogue as a means of achieving its objectives.

While this project did not directly apply PAR as a methodology, these key principles informed choices for the research creation completed, and were kept in mind at all times.

4.2 The two major parts to this research creation thesis

4.2.1 Part 1: Key principles for a practical guide to sustainable journalism (RQ1)

This thesis started by identifying key principles for a draft guideline to improve the usefulness of sustainable journalism. Key principles were identified in the literature through a thematic summary (Sandelowski, 2000) of works on sustainable journalism and the communication of sustainable development and our sustainable future. Part of this literature is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, but with the popularity of environmental journalism, climate change journalism, and solutions journalism, was also expanded to include other guidelines that promote quality journalism (i.e., those not specifically focused on sustainability; Berglez, 2023; Rögener & Wormer, 2017). These guidelines often include: (i) a set of criteria that a piece of journalism aims to fulfill (e.g., Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia & Abrar, 2020), (ii) a set of suggestions on the ‘dos and don’ts’ while reporting on a story (e.g., Bourassa, 2013), or (iii) a set of ethical rules (e.g., Sanal & Aram, 2023).

Approaches to guideline development in journalism are varied, often shaped either by theoretical frameworks (Berglez, 2023) or the specific needs of a given journalistic field (Rögener & Wormer, 2017). In this thesis, the guideline took the form of a set of principles and suggestions aimed at encouraging journalists to rethink their role within a broader societal and ecological context. Drawing from Obateru’s (2021) findings, which highlight the significant influence of journalists’ perspectives on public understanding of key issues, the practical guide to sustainable journalism was designed to empower journalists to critically engage with systemic problems and explore viable solutions. It invites them to cultivate informed perspectives on sustainability and to build relationships with communities and organisations actively working toward change. As a pragmatic and adaptive approach, the guide was conceived as a living document—one that evolves in response to the shifting demands and urgencies of its time (Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1 Image source: Chat GPT, Visual representation of the process of the Sustainable journalism guide as a living document

The development of the guide was also informed by a qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2021). The survey was conducted online with members of Concordia University's sustainability community in over two months between late January and early March 2025. This included representatives from various sustainability-focused organizations such as the [Office of Sustainability](#), [Sustainable Concordia](#), [Concordia Food Coalition](#), among others (particularly those associated with student-led fee-levy organizations). Additionally, organizations like the Office of Sustainability and SHIFT were included due to their explicit alignment with sustainability principles. Participants were selected based on their substantial experience working with sustainability-related initiatives and projects, ensuring a strong grasp of the subject matter and the ability to contribute meaningful insights from the field. Invitations were sent through official email communication channels, with requests to circulate the survey among all working members.

The survey employed 12 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' perspectives on sustainability, their evaluation of current communication practices surrounding sustainable development, and their views on what aspects of sustainability communication are most critical

(see Appendix 1 for the full list of questions). The survey was administered via Qualtrics, an experience management software commonly used for gathering qualitative data. While the exact number of recipients remains uncertain, it is estimated that the survey reached approximately 50–55 individuals, with 13 completing it (approximately a 25% response rate). Participants were offered the option to remain anonymous, and the majority chose to do so. The survey was approved by Concordia's Research Ethics Unit with certificate number 30021246.

The design of the survey was, arguably, the most straightforward part of the process. Having engaged with Concordia's sustainability community in various roles—such as board member, volunteer, ambassador, and working group member—I brought a nuanced understanding of both the operational dynamics of sustainability and the current state of related communication efforts. The survey questions were shaped not only by academic literature but also by my direct experiences and conversations with sustainability practitioners. Ultimately, the questions were crafted to capture expert perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in communicating sustainability in an accessible and impactful way.

Data analysis of the survey results followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach, which is well-suited for exploring complex, interdisciplinary subjects such as sustainability communication. This flexible method enabled the identification of recurring patterns across the qualitative survey responses. After being familiarized with the data through repeated reading, initial codes were manually generated based on recurring ideas related to sustainability, communication, empowerment, and systemic barriers (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88-89). These codes were then organized into broader themes such as critiques of green consumerism, the need for inclusive and locally grounded reporting, and calls for shifting media narratives from individual to systemic responsibility. The themes were refined to ensure clarity, distinctiveness, and alignment with the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 91–93). Finally, the themes were translated into actionable insights that directly informed the Guide for Sustainable Journalism (see Appendix 2), particularly in its emphasis on framing, tone, journalistic approach, and inclusivity.

Lastly for Part 1, a final open thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted on different scholarly works related to the topics of sustainability and communication, and sustainability and journalism. This final step was targeted and involved directed, open reading

that envisioned these scholarly works as qualitative data. Themes such as the success of sustainable initiatives through media interventions (Fischer et al., 2022), suggestions for impactful communication for a sustainable future (Atanasova, 2019), future scope of application of theory (Berglez, 2023), and reasons for the unpopularity of sustainability-related communication in traditional media (Berglez, 2011)—as discussed by the researchers—were considered primary. Following this, the patterns from this open reading were categorized into broader themes. After reviewing the scholarly works multiple times, these themes were refined and simplified. These themes were then translated into actionable insights that directly informed the Guide for Sustainable Journalism (see Appendix 2), particularly in its emphasis on framing, storytelling, and journalistic approach.

4.2.2 Part 2: Application of a practical guide to sustainable journalism (RQ2)

Informed by PAR (Cornish et al., 2023), Part 2 of this research creation thesis involved applying the practical guide from Part 1 to report on sustainable initiatives at Concordia University. This research-creation took place on site during the summer of 2025, and sought to create audio and visual journalism. This on-site testing was essential, as it provided insight into both the functionality of the guide and reflections on RQ2 as to whether an audience wants to understand the facts of a sustainability event or are interested in the stories of people who are making a difference. These stories allowed me to explore why people choose to incorporate sustainable practices in their everyday life and what kind of information helps them make informed decisions.

The audio and visual journalism created for this project includes interviews with different people who have founded, work with or volunteer with sustainable initiatives on campus for betterment of the Concordia community and beyond. These interviews allowed for this thesis to be informed by the high motivation and perspective of people who have chosen sustainable living and create sustainable projects out of their lived experiences. I used short-form visual documentation methods (Langmann & Pick, 2018) along with mid to long form podcasts inspired by the National Geographic Podcast [Overheard](#). Social media based in local news can provide a sense of community to like minded people (Lysak et al., 2012) and also help reporters connect with audiences (Stassen, 2010). Although these studies are a decade old, these points still ring true today. Along with the popularity of podcasting as an information provider (Heshmat et al., 2018),

I hoped to allow my interviewees story to shine through and create personal narratives that connect with audiences, all with the goal of testing the Part 1 guide.

The two initiatives that agreed to participate in this research-creation thesis were [Cultivaction](#) and the [Hive Free Meals Program](#). These initiatives were chosen because both provide locally relevant solutions to address the food insecurity faced by students on campus.

Cultivaction was founded during the pandemic to preserve green spaces at Concordia's Loyola Campus. Cultivaction has grown into a student-led cooperative centered on regenerative agriculture and food sovereignty. The initiative practices chemical-free farming and cultivates heirloom varieties. They also provide educational programs on foraging, gardening, agriculture, and various aspects of growing food. I created two separate audio and visual pieces on this initiative, as its members hold expertise in diverse subjects. One story focused on alternative gardening and farming techniques and their impacts on the surrounding community, featuring Eric Chervrier and Mohamed Al-Duias. The other story explored mushrooms—what they are, how to grow them, and their role in waste management—featuring Nico Shuttle.

The Hive Free Meals Program was launched in 2017 with the aim of providing vegan lunches to students on the Loyola campus during school days. Over time, it has expanded to offer free breakfasts, and is now working to raise funds to provide free dinners as well. If successful, this would make them the first campus in Canada to offer three free meals a day to students in need. For this piece, I interviewed Emily Grey, the former Lunch Program Coordinator at the time, and Carissa Pillipow, a long-term volunteer and patron. Grey shared her experiences managing the lunch program and the daily challenges it faces, while Pillipow reflected on her time as both a volunteer and a student, and the benefits she has gained from the program beyond just free meals.

The short form visual documentaries are between 60 sec to 90 secs, and the long format podcasts are approximately 12 minutes each. Although it was not intended, initiatives which agreed to be part of this research-creation thesis were food related. The thesis therefore created a three-part series on food cultivation and transformation. This focus proves to be very important for wider sustainability issues and a strong example with which to test RQ2.

For example, according to the United Nations, in 2022, 9.2% of the world's population—approximately 735 million people—were facing chronic hunger. This is not the only food insecurity challenge confronting our society today; population growth, urbanisation, changing consumer patterns, and climate change have all contributed to rising food inflation (United Nation, n.d.). During a press release, UN Secretary-General António Guterres reflected: *“Broken food systems are not inevitable. They are the result of choices we have made. There is more than enough food in the world to go around. More than enough money to fund efficient and sustainable food systems to feed the world, while supporting decent work for those who grow the food we eat”* (United Nation, 2023). In addition, Ritchie et al. (2022) reported that food production is responsible for 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Ritchie et al., 2022). Taken together, these realities make it clear that we, as a society, must reimagine our relationship with food, the systems that sustain it, and engage with the complexity of how to create impactful sustainable journalism on the topic.

As an added benefit, food cultivation, sustainability and transformation, and communication about them, have been one of my interests.

Chapter 5 - Results and Reflections

5.1 RQ1: From fiction to function: Re-imagining media's role in our sustainable future

The first result of this research-creation thesis is a set of guidelines entitled 'From fiction to function: Re-imagining media's role in our sustainable future' (see Appendix 2). These guidelines focus on sustainable journalism and aim to achieve four key objectives:

1. To re-imagine the role of journalism in a sustainable future.
2. To empower and equip the public to move towards sustainable practices.
3. To re-evaluate the role of objectivity in the practice of sustainable journalism.
4. To re-evaluate the role of journalists' own perspective when engaging in public discourse and the creation of common knowledge.

These objectives resulted in the following principles being identified as key to the future usefulness of sustainable journalism:

	Principles	Its relationship with Sustainability/ sustainable future
1	Define your perspective and objective	Start by clarifying your perspective and opinions on sustainability. Know what story you want to tell and how it can empower your audience to make meaningful, sustainable choices. This will help you set clear goals for your story. At this stage, it is also important to define the emotions you want to evoke in your audience.
2	Align your objective with your motivation for telling the story	Make sure your purpose drives your reporting. Stories should reflect your intention to inform, inspire, or catalyze sustainable change—not just attract clicks. To achieve this, move beyond the 5Ws and H, and ask: 'What now?'
3	Consider the conative and cognitive requirements of the audience	Understand what your audience knows, feels, and what they can do. Provide resources, context, and guidance to make sustainable choices feel possible and practical.
4	Take a solution-based approach	Focus on the actions your audience can take, or on successful solutions they can draw inspiration from to make sustainable changes.
5	Depoliticize the story	Focus on collective solutions rather than partisan debates. Keep attention on what works, who is involved,

		and the power of collective action. This will allow you to practice sustainable journalism with a future-oriented mindset.
6	It's a collaboration - not just a story you are telling	Let the voices of communities, initiatives, and changemakers lead. As a facilitator, your role is to help them tell their stories authentically and inclusively.
7	Framing the story correctly	Shape narratives with the public in mind. Use clear, simple language and emphasize social relevance to make sustainability tangible and relatable.
8	Local and cultural context matters	Shape narratives with the public in mind. Use clear, simple language, and highlight social relevance to make sustainability tangible and relatable.
9	Use storytelling as a tool	Go beyond facts—use stories to highlight lived experiences and human impact. Emotion, narrative, and perspective make complex sustainability issues resonate.
10	Consider how your stories will be perceived by the audience and how they will affect them	Consider how your story empowers the audience. Help them feel capable, informed, and motivated to contribute to sustainable change.

Table 1.1 Principles from sustainable journalism guide and its relationship to sustainability/ sustainable future

These ten principles link to gaps in how past journalism on sustainability has failed to have a clear objective on debates in sustainability fields (Bonfadelli, 2010), how the motivation and intention of reporters are hardly ever addressed (Fritz, 2022), and how past work tended to politicize sustainability as a matter of crises or not (Nisbet & Fahy, 2015). Such challenges are outlined in the four themes presented in Chapter 3, but to my knowledge this is one of the first times such academic work has been translated into a practical guide.

Reflecting on RQ1 and the purpose of this question, this guide represents practical strategies that journalists can adopt to report on sustainability in ways that are constructive, contextual, and inclusive. For example, the guide asked journalists to define their perspective and objective for doing the story, which is meant to encourage journalists to understand their own thoughts on the topic and how it can influence the story. Another example is how local and cultural context matters, where the goal was to encourage journalists to better understand how their audience engages with sustainability locally and the influence of cultural traditions before crafting their journalism (think beforehand as sustainable issues are complex). This extends to understanding

if a solution-based story has local and cultural relevance for their audience. More details on the why and the how of the guide are available in Appendix 2.

5.2 RQ1: Survey Results

Survey responses consistently emphasized the importance of equipping audiences with knowledge that inspires agency rather than despair. This survey represented a novel contribution to the project, offering a deeper understanding of what local experts believe should be prioritized in communication efforts to advance sustainability goals. By integrating these findings with insights from scholarly literature, the guide was improved with a more unique and grounded perspective.

The survey explored participants' personal and professional relationships with sustainability, with 12 questions addressing its definition, communication, and media representation. While definitions of sustainability varied, reflecting individual values and experiences, a shared emphasis on social justice, ecological interdependence, and community-centered approaches emerged. For example, Participant D described sustainability as “aligning our social and institutional systems to value human and non-human life,” echoing a collectivist and justice-driven view that challenges dominant growth-based paradigms.

Interestingly, while participants generally acknowledged sustainability as both a scientific and social issue, most leaned toward viewing it primarily as social. This view was best captured by Sheena Swirlz, who emphasized how “apathy and convenience drive citizens to make poor decisions,” stressing the importance of informed, empowered communities.

The responses also revealed a critical stance on green consumerism and its media portrayal. Participants cautioned against media narratives that individualize responsibility and promote unchecked consumerism, even when framed as “green.” Several advocated for a journalism that centers marginalized voices and focuses on systemic change. As one participant suggested, sustainability communication must move beyond awareness and toward fostering tangible, collective action. These insights are essential for reimagining how journalism can serve as a tool for equity and transformation in the sustainability discourse.

The detailed analysis and data of the survey is attached as Appendix 1.

5.3: RQ1: Author's specific reflections on the guide and its development

As this was the author's first formal research into sustainable journalism, identifying appropriate principles for the guide proved to be both challenging and rewarding. Sustainable journalism is still a nascent field with limited scholarly consensus (Berglez et al., 2017) or established best practices (Fischer et al., 2022). However, this lack of precedent also enabled me to approach the subject with creativity and originality, drawing on lived experience, interdisciplinary knowledge, and a reflective research process. In doing so, I hoped to address how journalism can better aid in a sustainable future and allow previously limited PAR-informed research (see Chapter 4) on sustainable journalism to flourish.

Journalism has historically played a crucial role in shaping public understanding and catalyzing social change (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). The development of the guide reaffirmed the belief that journalism must be redefined if it is to meet the demands of an ecologically and socially sustainable future. A reoriented journalism—grounded in sustainability—must go beyond informing; it must also engage, empower, and equip the public to envision alternative futures. This guide is designed to serve as a living document and to grow and progress with the information needs of a changing society. The hope is that as it is used it will improve.

5.4: RQ2: Application of Guide

The second result of this research-creation thesis is an original two-part series of audio and video journalism entitled Food Focused - Sustainable Food Systems of Concordia. This series involved the following podcasts and social media video:

1. Cultivation Stories

A1. [Experiment, Grow, Repeat—The Adventures of Alternative Agriculture](#) (Short Video)

A2. [Experiment, Grow, Repeat—The Adventures of Alternative Agriculture](#) (Podcast)

B1. [From Plate to potential - the mystical adventures of mushrooms](#) (Short Video)

B2. [From Plate to potential - the mystical adventures of mushrooms](#) (Podcast)

2. Hive Free Meals Program

C1. [Beyond Free Meals - A Recipe for Community Connection](#) (Short Video)

C2. [Beyond Free Meals - A Recipe for Community Connection](#) (Podcast)

RQ2 was informed by scholarly literature on sustainability communication, particularly the edited volume *Narrating Sustainability Through Storytelling* by Daniel Fischer, Sonja Fückker, Hanna Selm, and Anna Sundermann. The book explores the use of narrative frameworks to communicate sustainability in ways that are relatable and transformative, suggesting that emotional engagement plays a vital role in motivating individual and collective action.

Briefly, the stories embody the RQ1 guide in several ways. They take a solution-oriented approach (principle 4) relevant to Concordia students, while drawing on the experiential knowledge of sustainable initiatives that shaped the audio and video pieces. This can be seen in *Beyond Free Meals* when the story deals with how having limited funding has impacted the organization and how they overcame this by communicating their need for more volunteers. The journalism pieces on Cultivation's alternate farming reflected principle 3 - the conative abilities of students were considered by addressing the level of ease in making the sustainable transformations suggested.

All the pieces reflected principle 6 — *"It's a collaboration, not just a story you are telling"* — by being transparent about the motivation behind the stories and integrating suggestions from collaborators. When I first met Emily Grey, the former lunch coordinator of Hive Free Meals, I explained the project and emphasized, *"I would like for this to be a collaboration. If you have any suggestions or comments, I will do my best to accommodate them."* Grey suggested documenting the experience of a long-term volunteer, and this directly shaped the story. This was not my past approach to sustainability stories as a journalist, which often took a one-sided, one-way communication approach.

The stories also challenge the convention of using a formal, detached tone. Instead, a conversational and semi-formal style (principle 7) was chosen to resonate with the primary

audience: young Concordia students and community members. This can be seen in all the short videos and podcasts, particularly in the podcast about alternate farming with Eric Cher and Mohammed Al-Duais. This choice made the stories more inviting, helping the consumers of the story(s) understand the resources available to them and encouraging them to visit CultivAction farms or Hive Free Meals services. In this way, the stories reflect Fischer et al.'s (2022) work, who notes that "storytelling is about using narrative structures to achieve certain affective, cognitive, or conative effects in readers" (p. 14). These pieces were designed to provide accessible solutions while also sparking curiosity about sustainable practices.

Reflecting on RQ2, the journalism production undertaken created space for the author to reflect on individual action through qualitative and participatory methods. Collaborating with two of Concordia's sustainability initiatives provided insights not only into the challenges they face, but also into how, with creativity and limited resources, they find ways to overcome them. This truly reflects the fact that sustainability requires a change in narrative — a shift in mindset. Once one understands the essence of sustainability and the importance of sustainable actions, one can find ways to address sustainability issues with a pragmatic approach.

Drawing from my own experience, my approach to a sustainable future was initially through technological innovation. Later, during my time in Auroville³—a small experimental town in South India where sustainability is embedded in every aspect of life—I came to realize that (un)sustainability is not only a systems issue but equally, if not more, a communications issue. Hearing people's stories and lived experiences during this project highlighted how abstract ideas and data alone are insufficient; it is through human-centered storytelling that the essence of sustainability becomes meaningful and actionable. This reinforces that sustainable journalism can have greater impact when grounded in narratives that connect facts to lived realities.

³ Auroville is an experimental town established February 28, 1968, by a French-Indian spiritual guru, Mira Alfassa. It is located in the state of Tamil Nadu, India. Although the city was established as a spiritual center (Bhatia, 2014; Koduvayur Venkitaraman & Joshi, 2022), it has grown to be one of the biggest eco villages in the world with a population of approximately 3300 people from 62 countries. Sustainability is not an official part of Auroville charter but is a central theme for Aurovillians and the research occurring there (Koduvayur Venkitaraman & Joshi, 2022). The purpose of this ecovillage is to serve as a laboratory for testing alternative and holistic models of development, including social and ecological fixes, which can be overlooked when focusing solely on technological issues to a systematic problem.

5.5 Overall reflections and the future of sustainable journalism

This is not the first instance in which human civilization has faced a challenge encompassing all systems and forms of life. What distinguishes the present, however, is our increasing mastery of mediated communication. Advances in technology now enable the rapid and efficient dissemination of information in ways that were unavailable to our ancestors. For betterment of the future of this planet it is important to change the narrative of sustainability and work towards a sustainable transformation.

Inspired by the work of Barron et al. (2017), one of the goals of the guide on sustainable journalism was to create an expressional impact on the public to empower them to participate in being change makers. Barron et al. (2017) writes: “[c]onsider an interjection that other speakers ignore in order to return to the matter at hand. That interjection would be surprising given its past, but equally surprising given its future, symmetric surprise under time reversal, because all the new information is lost, or transient. In contrast, a rhetorically effective interjection might shift the conversation to a new issue with differing vocabulary. This shift would appear as a surprise asymmetry about the interjection” (p. 7).

For me, Barron et al. (2017) are suggesting that achieving social transformation depends largely on the elements of novelty and resonance. In this case, the novelty lies in the concept itself, while the resonance comes from using tone and language that connects with the intended audience. The guide and the journalism created for this project sought to question conventional practices and drew inspiration from fields such as advertising, marketing, sociology, psychology, and beyond. This interdisciplinary approach was used to capture attention and highlight the urgency and importance of sustainable transformation.

At the heart of this research was the development of a guide, included as *Appendix 2*. Creating this guide was a revitalizing experience—it challenged and expanded my understanding of sustainability, prompting me to re-evaluate my own assumptions and values. I used to believe that people were either misinformed or uninformed, and that if I could simply explain the importance of sustainability, they would understand and naturally work toward sustainable transformation. At that time, I saw sustainability as primarily a matter of awareness (a matter of more journalism). While I recognized that sustainability is about systemic change, I assumed

that once people were informed by journalists and others, change would happen organically. My perspective has since evolved. I now understand that systemic change and individual responsibility are not separate but deeply interconnected.

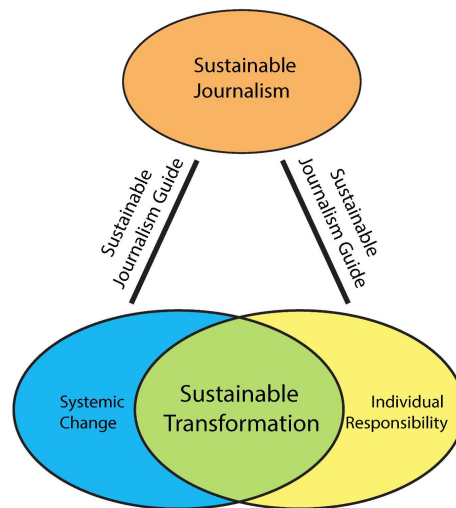


Figure 1.2 Visual Representation of Sustainable Transformation

For transformation to be sustained, and for sustainable journalism to theoretically advance, both must happen simultaneously (Figure 1.2). Individuals, institutions, and systems all have to play their part in making the shift toward a sustainable future. This process has not only deepened my comprehension of the topic but also boosted my confidence in tackling complex challenges. Through this research-creation thesis I strengthened my belief that diversity and inclusivity are integral parts of problem solving, especially for a sustainable future because of the complex and interdisciplinary nature of sustainability.

Since childhood, I have been fascinated by Indian mythological stories. My father used to tell me these stories because I disliked reading. These stories have helped me understand multiple complex contexts of life including communication and transformation. Although my mind at the time could not understand the importance of storytelling, it is now clear to me that storytelling is the most important tool in creating public discourse and sustainable transformation (Fischer et al., 2022). In the Indian context, mythology, religion, and culture are deeply intertwined. Through

these kinds of stories, I was able to and will continue to understand the complex and diverse nature of Indian society. Building a guide for sustainable journalism helped me understand that storytelling can help people relate to complex concepts with ease.

One writer I find fascinating is Devdutt Pattanaik, who reinterprets Indian mythology and religious literature through a modern lens. He demonstrates that Hinduism was never a rigid religion but a philosophy centered on one's impact on the earth and the consequences of their actions. This aligns with modern sustainability, which also emphasizes long-term impacts and contextual thinking.

For instance, the sustainability debate often focuses on promoting plant-based diets over meat consumption. While this is logical from a resource efficiency standpoint, it lacks contextual nuance. What about people in remote areas with extreme weather who rely on hunting? Or cultural dishes tied to memory and identity? These nuances matter before making sustainability a legislative issue.

As Devdutt Pattanaik has beautifully quoted this through his multiple works and speech (Pattanaik, 2017):

“Within infinite myths lies the eternal truth
Who sees it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes,
Indra has a hundred,
You and I, only two.”

Having this deep connection and fascination with mythological stories have helped me look for solutions for sustainability related communication beyond the obvious. In exploring sustainable journalism, as an emergent idea in journalism studies (Berglez et al., 2017), I have come to consider Pattanaik's ideas as important for creating journalism with a diverse perspective on sustainability and its narration. As a journalist, who wants to report on stories which can empower and equip the audience for sustainable transformation, I believe the only way to provide context to sustainability is to embrace diversity and ambiguity.

Schirrmeister et al. (2020) and Barnett and Diakopoulos (2022) have established that diverse opinions help in creating universal solutions and effective decision making. Throughout this project, I had the opportunity to collaborate with a number of inspiring individuals with diverse views on sustainability. These collaborations enriched my practical knowledge and honed my abilities as a critical thinker and problem solver. Although it was not an initial objective, all the stories I ended up covering were connected by a common thread: food systems on the Concordia campus—ranging from food production to transformation and consumption. Food security, though often unspoken, remains a pressing concern among Concordia students. A [report](#) was published by Concordia University indicating that 67% of Concordia students are facing food insecurity (Concordia University, 2023). This realization drove me to explore food systems more intentionally, both on and off campus.

Reporting on food systems at Concordia has been invigorating. I've become increasingly drawn to understanding how sustainable futures rely on reimagined food systems—and how our current food structures influence, and are influenced by, wider societal frameworks such as politics and the economy (Pereira et al., 2020). To me, food systems serve a greater purpose than simply sustaining life—they are also sites of cultural meaning, creative expression, and historical continuity. Through the conversations I conducted for this project, recurring themes emerged, especially the challenge of adapting sustainable solutions and the barriers posed by prevailing mindsets rooted in extraction and exploitation. When I consider a future for sustainable journalism, this makes me want to prioritize engaging with pragmatic solutions which can provide short-term and long-term solutions to the sustainability crises faced by society today (and to encourage other journalists to do the same).

This leads to a compelling tension for sustainable journalism – experts engaged during the project emphasized the need for a shift in public discourse – from blaming individuals to recognizing systemic issues. On the other hand, these same experts noted the importance of personal, sustainable choices in their day-to-day actions. This duality stood out. I believe that while systemic change is necessary, it should not absolve individuals of responsibility. There is a delicate balance between acknowledging systemic barriers and recognizing the power of personal agency. We as journalists have the power to communicate this widely and encourage people to move towards a sustainable future through our journalism.

Finally, theoretically this research sought to extend and engage with the work of scholars examining the relationship between journalism, communication, and sustainability. Scholars like Berglez (2023), Bonfadelli (2010), and Fischer et al. (2020) highlight a persistent gap in the field—namely, the lack of communication between sustainability experts across different disciplines. Fischer et al. (2020) particularly notes that “[t]he lack of interaction between these siloes... makes it difficult to fertilize cross-sectoral learning between different groups/communities of practitioners and researchers, let alone synthesize findings on the general effects/effectiveness of storytelling” (p. 2). For sustainable journalism to further develop, I recommend the following:

- A. Understand your relationship with sustainability and how it influences your professional work.
- B. Challenge the convention of objectivity in journalism to allow different stories to emerge.
- C. Collaboration is the key, let people tell their stories.

Future research could also focus on creating a system which prioritizes a sustainable future for all, along with shifting the narrative of sustainability to aid a sustainable future.

5.6 Challenges, limitations and future research

One of the key challenges in this project was translating the guide’s principles—particularly the idea of letting people tell their own stories—into actual practice. Although participants were asked open-ended questions, I often needed to provide context as a reporter to frame their responses for a wider audience. This necessary mediation sometimes risked influencing how stories were told, which raises questions about narrative authorship and positionality in journalistic storytelling (Fung & Weder, 2025).

The most significant limitation of this study was the small participant sample for the qualitative survey, as 13 responses from Concordia community members does represent a limited sample, the results of which should not be overextended. However, as a first attempt aimed at enriching an initial guide for sustainable journalism, which was the first of its type created, the survey proved valuable to the project’s research-creation goals. For future research, it would be ideal to

conduct similar surveys across multiple universities and sustainability communities, including scholars in the field of sustainability to enhance the depth and diversity of perspectives.

There is also an inherent limit to practical guides in a fast moving, research intensive, field such as sustainability. Journalism guides can become out of date and need continual use and revision to be impactful. The hope, however, is that this first guide will gain traction and continue to help advance scholarship on sustainable journalism.

As outlined in Participatory Action Research (PAR) theory, research aimed at social change should be collective and pragmatic. This principle is especially important in sustainability work, given its inherently interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral nature. There is an urgent need for communication professionals to help empower the public and build capacity for sustainable transformation. Future research must continue to explore how communication—not just in journalism but across media and public discourse—can cultivate a more informed, inspired, and engaged public ready to act toward a sustainable future.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The question of why people choose sustainable systems and practices in their personal life and how it shapes their professional options for a sustainable future has been an interest of mine for a decade. There is growing evidence that suggests that media and journalism in particular have a crucial role in moving our society towards a sustainable future (Berglez et al., 2017; Fischer et al., 2022). Perhaps one of the greatest challenges ahead lies in rethinking the dominant narratives around sustainability. Communication experts must explore how to shift public discourse away from conflict-driven, blame-oriented storytelling toward narratives that foster understanding, hope, and agency.

As discussed in Chapter 1, this research-creation thesis has several purposes, both personal and academic. This research-creation thesis created one of the first practical guides of its type on sustainable journalism. This guide was used to create six journalism pieces and reflect on the role of journalism in our sustainable future. I found three other guides, which discuss the role of journalism in a sustainable future (European Journalism Centre (EJC), 2021; Institute of Sustainability Studies, 2024; Sustainability Directory, 2025), showing a growing interest in this area of study. Reflecting on these results, three conclusions stand out: (i) the need to re-think the role of different narratives on the audience when reporting on sustainable stories; (ii), the importance of holding all systems and all human parts of these systems accountable for contribution to unsustainable development; and (iii) that there is still room to grow in how we effectively use storytelling as a tool for sustainable transformation.

These conclusions will need to re-imagine how news should be portrayed. In the last decade, with the rise of internet use and widespread accessibility to social media, the way news is consumed has changed significantly. According to a global report, short social media videos have become the most popular form of news media in the past few years amongst the younger population (Newman et al., 2024). The shift in how information is conveyed and consumed has also impacted trust in media, with the Reuters Institute digital news report highlighting “[i]nterest in the news has been falling, the proportion avoiding it has increased, trust remains low, and many consumers are feeling increasingly overwhelmed and confused by the amount of news”(p. 31). This highlights the need to train new journalists and especially journalism students about these challenges. The shift in how news is consumed is inevitable, the only way we can assure

that public trust remains intact is adapting the way we report and understand what the public wants.

I opted for short social media videos and podcasts for this work as I believe that peoples' voices have the power to inspire the audience to be part of change. Storytelling plays a crucial role in forming people's perspective on a topic (Fischer et al., 2020; Happer & Philo, 2013; Spradlin & Givens, 2022). I had, have, and will always continue to find storytelling inspiration in nature. As an introverted person, I find beauty and comfort in the natural world — in its rhythms, resilience, and quiet wisdom. Nature has always been a space where I feel most grounded and connected.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the society we live in has been shaped by our unique human ability to imagine — to find abstract meaning in the concrete, to create systems and structures out of ideas. Many of the systems around us today were born from someone's desire to build something meaningful. But innovation and evolution haven't always translated into progress for all. Somewhere along the way, our wants have started to outweigh our resources, and that imbalance now demands urgent attention. We as journalists have the ability to change the narrative and create awareness about sustainable transformation (Atanasova, 2019).

In conclusion, we are at a critical point — if we fail to understand the needs of our society in transitioning toward more sustainable practices, the future of our planet will be in jeopardy. The need for journalists to advocate has become of utmost necessity for the future of our planet (Fung & Weder, 2025). The systems we've come to rely on may no longer be able to serve us. I truly believe that communication — particularly sustainability-related dialogue in the public sphere — holds a vital role in this transition. Sustainability related news is given importance only when something catastrophic happens (Sanal & Aram, 2023). This needs to change. We as journalists have to challenge the norms and enlighten old means about the importance of covering sustainable journalism. Alongside systemic change, we need storytelling, awareness, and open conversation to shift perspectives and inspire collective action. Only then can we begin to imagine — and build — a more sustainable future.

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Appendix 1

Survey

The survey was conducted over two months, between the last week of January and the first week of March. Most of the organisations selected were student-led, fee-levy groups listed under the Concordia Student Union. The survey was sent to the designated communications contact listed on each organisation's website or social media. In the email, it was clearly requested that the invitation be forwarded to all working members of the organisation.

Additionally, the Office of Sustainability and SHIFT were selected for their campus-wide and broader visions for sustainability. These organisations publicly listed their team members and contact details, so all members received direct invitations to participate.

Due to the nature of distribution and ethical considerations, it is difficult to determine the exact number of individuals who received the survey. Based on estimations, around 50 to 55 people were contacted, and 13 responded within the survey period.

Participants had the option to remain anonymous. Out of the 13 responses, 8 participants chose anonymity. The survey consisted of 12 questions—11 of which were open-ended and aimed at exploring participants' understandings of sustainability, their personal motivations, and their views on sustainability-related communication.

Survey Questions

- 1. Please describe your job role and how it relates to sustainability on campus?*
- 2. What is the role of sustainability in your life?*
- 3. What does sustainability mean to you? Answer in one sentence.*
- 4. What are the easiest sustainability practices you want the public to know?*
- 5. Do you consider sustainability a scientific or social problem? Please support your answer with a short explanation.*
- 6. What are your thoughts on green consumerism?*

7. *What do you think is the role of the media in green consumerism?*
8. *Do you consume any journalism about sustainability? Yes or No*
9. *If you answered yes to the previous question, what type/genre of journalism do you consume about sustainability?*
 - *Long or short form Documentary*
 - *Tradition News*
 - *Social Media Journalism*
 - *Other*
10. *Is there one thing about sustainability you wish the journalism communicated rigorously ?*
11. *In your opinion, are there any changes needed in sustainability related communication in order for it to bring in the social transformation?*
12. *In your opinion, what should be the role of the media in creating a sustainable future?*

Methodology:

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasizes identifying recurring patterns within qualitative data. This approach was chosen for its accessibility and theoretical flexibility, making it well-suited for examining the complex and interdisciplinary nature of sustainability communication. Using their six-phase process, I first familiarized myself with the survey responses—reading them multiple times despite my prior experience in Concordia's sustainability community—to gain deeper insight into participants' language patterns, recurring ideas, and concerns.

I then generated initial codes manually, highlighting both surface-level and underlying meanings related to sustainability, communication, empowerment, barriers, and gaps. These codes were grouped into broader categories, from critiques of green consumerism to calls for systemic responsibility, local relevance, representation of marginalized voices, and solution-based journalism. Reviewing and refining the themes ensured they were distinct, well-supported, and aligned with my research questions. Finally, I defined and named the themes so they could be translated into actionable insights, which directly informed the structure, framing, tone, and inclusivity of the Guide for Sustainable Journalism (see Appendix 2).

Key finding:

Responses to Q1 were excluded from publication to protect identities. They were used solely to verify whether the participant was affiliated with Concordia's sustainability community. Full, anonymized responses are attached at the end of this document.

A few key themes emerged: While many participants recognized sustainability as both a scientific and social issue, most leaned toward it being a primarily social challenge. For instance, Sheena Swirlz shared, *"Social problem. Apathy and convenience drive citizens to make poor decisions. Communities could mobilize on every level to create ecological systems if they were informed, empowered and networked."*

Each participant defined sustainability differently, influenced by their personal and professional experiences. Participant D described it as *"aligning our social and institutional systems to value human and non-human life, so that everyone in our generation and those to come are able to access what they need to live joyfully."* This definition aligned more with a socialist interpretation of the Brundtland definition of sustainable development. Another respondent, Participant B, said, *"Sustainability is living responsibly, in harmony with the rest of the non-human world."* Similarly, Manon described it as *"making choices that empower, not harm, vulnerable communities and wildlife in our ever-developing, human-centric world."* These perspectives highlight a shared belief that the planet's resources are not solely for human use, but should be equally available to all living systems.

When asked about easy, accessible sustainability practices, participants frequently mentioned reducing food waste, adopting plant-based diets, reusing items, and shopping second-hand. While not always easy or accessible for everyone, collective action and systemic change were also seen as vital for building a sustainable future.

Participants generally viewed green consumerism as a step in the right direction but also voiced concerns about its limitations. Duha Elmradi noted, *"I think it is a good alternative for sure. But I think that it is still consumerism, and unless we tackle the problem of capitalism, which consumerism is an inherent part of, green consumerism can be inadequate. Sometimes, it is also inaccessible to many people."*

Regarding the media's role in green consumerism, participants agreed that while journalism may not be directly responsible for greenwashing, it often fails to critically examine the sustainability claims of products and services. Participant F noted, *“Ads are the primary vehicle through which greenwashing occurs. Social media platforms house influencers who perpetuate the popularization of 'natural', 'organic' lifestyles through consumption of specific products. Journalism may or may not question the sustainability claims of 'green' companies.”* Meanwhile, Participant D commented, *“[Media’s role is] to convince us all that we need to keep buying more things, when we do not.”*

All participants agreed that journalism must evolve to support a sustainable future. Many stressed the need for a shift in narrative—moving away from individual responsibility and toward actionable, collective, and systemic solutions. Sheena Swirlz emphasized, *“Many sustainability messages focus on raising awareness, but awareness alone doesn’t always lead to action. Communication should emphasize tangible actions that individuals and communities can take.”* She also highlighted the importance of crafting culturally relevant, non-judgmental, and accessible messaging: *“People engage more when they see themselves reflected in sustainability stories.”* This aligns with findings from scholars in sustainability communication (Brüggemann, 2017; Das et al., 2009; Fischer et al., 2022; Spradlin & Givens, 2022).

All respondents consumed some form of sustainability-related journalism. One participant reported listening to podcasts, while two others mentioned reading magazines and following nonprofit, independent media sources. A chart summarizing these responses is provided below.

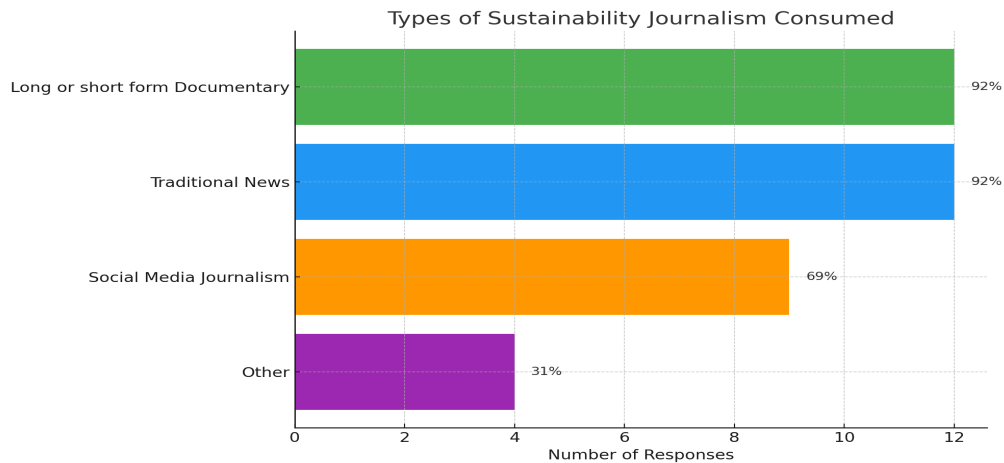


Figure A - Source: Qultratics - Graph showing the percentage of people using different form of media

Refined and Reviewed Key Themes

1. Critical Change in Media Narrative of Sustainability

- Critique of green consumerism
- Critique of shifting the media narrative from individual responsibility to systemic issues
- Underreporting of the root causes of unsustainable systems and practices
- Reframing sustainability as a social issue rather than solely a scientific one

2. Inclusive and Community-Led Storytelling for Sustainable Change

- The need for representation of marginalized and diverse voices in media
- The need for representation of locally relevant, solution-oriented initiatives
- The need for collective action for sustainable change

3. Unlearning, Learning, and Relearning for a Sustainable Future

- The need to educate the public about non-human life and the ecological impacts of current systems for a sustainable transition
- The need to educate the public on unlearning unsustainable practices and equip them with the skills to adapt to sustainable practices

4. Need for Systemic Change and a Shift in Power

- The need to move away from extractive and exploitative systems for a sustainable future
- The need to amplify the voices of those most affected by unsustainable systems
- The need to involve the public in making sustainable transitions

5. Accountability and Impact in Reporting

- The need to encourage journalists to report on the environmental and social impacts of products, current systems, and services

Data From the Survey

Questions relevant to the study												
Participant Name	Q2. What is the role of sustainability in your life?	Q3. What does sustainability mean to you? Answer in one sentence.	Q4. What are the easiest sustainability practices you want the public to know?	Q5. Do you consider sustainability a scientific or social problem? Please support your answer with a short explanation.	Q6. What are your thoughts on Green Consumerism?	Q7. What do you think is the role of the media in green consumerism?	Q8. Do you consume any Journalism about sustainability?	Q9. If you answered yes to the previous question, what type/genre of journalism do you consume about sustainability?	Q10. Is there one thing about sustainability you wish the journalism communicated rigorously?	Q11. In your opinion, are there any changes needed in sustainability related communication in order for it to bring in the social transformation?	Q12. In your opinion what should be the role of media in creating a sustainable future.	Q13. Would you like to add any additional comments?
Participant H	I try my best to have a sustainable lifestyle, it's important to me! I very rarely buy new clothing, and often thrift my clothes instead. I try to buy locally grown and organic food when I'm able to. I use public transit, Communauto, and use electric Bixis in the summer. I also garden organically!	Sustainability to me means using what I already have, eliminating waste, supporting anti-capitalist initiatives and gardening organically.	Reducing food waste is easier than you might think! Sometimes it just requires being creative and researching a few recipes. Freezing your food/meals is also a great habit to get into - having an extra meal prepared in advance is always a nice surprise during a busy week!	From my perspective, sustainability is a systemic and social problem. The capitalist system relies on the unending extraction of resources, which is degrading our environment. I believe socially we need to shift from being a capitalist-driven society in order to create a sustainable present & future.	I think it's great that consumers now have more sustainable options to choose from. I think one of the areas where it gets tricky is when companies such as Loblaws profit off of "eco-friendly" products. Food monopolies like Loblaws are the furthest thing away from being sustainable!	I think the media's role is to share current initiatives (both locally and globally) that promote sustainability/sustainable practices from an unbiased perspective.	Yes	- Long / short form - Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	I wish that journalism reported on local sustainable initiatives more.	I don't have a strong opinion on this. Possibly related - I believe that we need to shift from putting the responsibility solely on the individual to practice sustainability. The fossil fuel industry, and billionaires should be pressured. A shift towards sustainable energy and wealth sharing/taxation	In order to create a sustainable future, the media should cover environmental injustices/coverage of the climate crisis more broadly and frankly.	Thank you for conducting this survey :)
Participant G	In a holistic sense, it's integral. In terms of small personal actions that do not push for systemic change, it's medium important.	A movement that has been hijacked by corporate interests/capitalism and involves a lot of greenwashing but that ought to be the basis for our existence.	Land back to indigenous community stewardship	A social and scientific problem in that the mainstream scientific community doesn't center the voices of those on the frontlines of environmental protection. A social problem because it involves the rich causing environmental degradation that the poor pay for with their quality of life and lives.	It's not effective	They make environmental degradation and sustainability seem like an individual solution that is not the responsibility of the greatest polluters and the wealthiest.	Yes	- Long / short form - Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	Land Back is the only way we can truly protect our earth	Empowering the reader to know that they can make change collectively	Integral	
Participant F	Sustainability, in a holistic sense, is an important value and pursuit of mine. I endeavor to undertake personal behaviors to minimize my carbon and ecological footprint. I also donate, sign petitions, email my MPs, and join public demonstrations related to sustainability and social justice.	Sustainability is the state of our economies, societies, and environments when they are thriving, equitable, and just.	Reduce meat consumption and eliminate red meat consumption; Shop second-hand, Email or phone your MPs on important issues that you care about.	It is both. The physical nature of the sustainability crisis involves many scientific disciplines. However, I would argue that the causes of and solutions to the sustainability crisis are largely social in nature.	While it is possible to make more sustainable purchasing choices, greenwashing is common. As well, we can't plan seriously for sustainability without recognizing the harm caused by consumerism itself and shifting to a more circular economy.	Ads are the primary vehicle through which greenwashing occurs. Social media platforms house influencers who perpetuate the popularization of "natural", "organic" lifestyles through consumption of specific products. Journalism may or may not question the sustainability claims of "green" companies.	Yes	- Long / short form - Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	The extent to which our current systems, governments, and common practices are / are not advancing meaningful sustainability.	Recognizing that centrism or two-sided journalism is not objectivity or neutrality if it belies the facts. Freedom of the press unhindered by political or business interests. Fact-checking. Connecting negative economic, societal, and environmental events with the scientific consensus around climate	We desperately need reputable media that reports based on facts, highlights the impacts for everyday people of the sustainability and climate crises, shines light on successful interventions, and remains critical of unproven/untested technocentric solutions	
Participant E	It is a core part of my day to day understanding and actions. That is to say, it informs and directs my work, community organizing and personal spaces.	Sustainability is a concept and practice about our relations to the various aspects of social, economic and environmental justice, particularly, how they connect one another and form a basis to challenge the exploitation and extraction of resources, people and the places they live in	Mutual aid and community organizing	I consider it to be both. However, given the abundance of scientific knowledge on the subject, I lean towards there being more social obstacles to overcome. From my perspective, there exists a gap between the science and the realities people face on the ground, particularly marginalized communities	It largely depends on who and where this is applied to. If we are talking broadly, I would argue it does not have much impact since consumer decisions are relative to the larger systems such as governments and corporations. If the source of the problem is not changed, I'm uncertain of its affects	Media can play a key role to understand how capitalism and colonialism factor into the impact (as opposed to the image) of green consumerism. They can also very easily support forms of sustainability that have been co-opted or marketed to trick/persuade groups of peoples for them to seem sustainable	Yes	- Long / short form - Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	That sustainability is not solely about economic or environmental aspects of our lives but rather that it is the relation between them and our societies (and their the complex histories of capitalism, colonialism and imperialism).	Absolutely there is. Today there is far too much media and communication related to supporting corporations and governments. Too often it overlooks the larger socio-economic factors that can bring change to only foster the image powerful actors want to convey. It needs to	Telling the stories of people, particularly marginalized social groups, at the forefront of these struggles. The immense amount of work and resources that go into challenging profit and power that are driven by groups of people needs a lot more coverage to show what sustainability is really about	No

Questions relevant to the study

Participant Name	Q2. What is the role of sustainability in your life?	Q3. What does sustainability mean to you? Answer in one sentence.	Q4. What are the easiest sustainability practices you want the public to know?	Q5. Do you consider sustainability a scientific or social problem? Please support your answer with a short explanation.	Q6. What are your thoughts on Green Consumerism?	Q7. What do you think is the role of the media in green consumerism?	Q8. Do you consume any Journalism about sustainability?	Q9. If you answered yes to the previous question, what type/genre of journalism do you consume about sustainability?	Q10. Is there one thing about sustainability you wish the journalism communicated rigorously?	Q11. In your opinion, are there any changes needed in sustainability related communication in order for it to bring in the social transformation?	Q12. In your opinion what should be the role of media in creating a sustainable future.	Q13. Would you like to add any additional comments?
Participant D	It impacts all facets of my life as I navigate using the materials I have access to for their full lifetime, eating well, and trying to be an engaged citizen in a just society	Sustainability means aligning our social and institutional systems to value human and non-human life, so that everyone in our generation and those to come are able to access what they need to live joyfully	Reuse before you buy new things, research where you are buying from, and actually get involved in your municipal government to support change	I see it as primarily a social problem and as a symptom of the ideologies of colonialism. When we only value certain types of life, we do not care about what we take too much of from others, whether they're human or land.	Green consumerism is a strategy for reducing the harm of our currently unsustainable habits, but it is not a true solution for sustainability i.e. we use less plastic, but we don't dismantle a damaging global industry of consumerism.	To convince us all that we need to keep buying more things, when we do not	Yes	- Long / short form Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	How people away from the issue are impacted, too many people see it as an 'over there' problem. For example, how does cheaply made shoes from plastic impact the person purchasing it	I think sustainability related communication needs to tackle the selfishness and how uninformed most people are. They need to understand the roots of who makes these bad decisions, how does it impact them, and how do we change it.	Media needs to promote solutions, as well as who is responsible for the problem.	
Participant C	Sustainability is important in my life, I make personal choices to limit the impact that I have on the environment, like living at walking distance from work, like choosing quality over quantity, minimizing consumption of goods participating in circular economy, recycling, reusing, repairing, etc.	It's a responsible way of using resources and energy so that the planet earth remains a healthy living environment for future generations.	Living in a 15 min walk district, eat local and untransformed food, as much as possible, use active or public transportation modes, 3 Rs (repair, recycle, reuse), buy second hand (market place), limit long distance travels, enjoy outdoor activities with limited impact on the environment.	I would say it's a social problem, because the human activities and the policies have an impact on the environment, however the observation of the environment, measuring the impact of our activities and projecting the evolution according to different assumptions or models are scientific challenges.	I think this is a step in the right direction, I find more products that are designed or packaged with this objective and I appreciate that.	The media isn't promoting this enough. There is a lot of green washing and false interest in sustainability. For example, there is so much more advertisement and marketing for the car industry with the wrong message, like suggesting that we need bigger vehicles to have access to nature!	Yes	- Long / short form documentary - Traditional News - Others	Talk more about all the little steps that are positive, encourage the progress in Sustainability at the different levels (government, organizations, individual), inform on regulatory changes, policies, new initiatives, etc.	Yes, consumers need to be clearly informed of the environmental impact of the products that they purchase or activities that they do.	Yes, the Media and Marketing should be more critical and present the sustainable value systematically, according to ethical and scientific terms.	No other comments. Thank you.
Participant B	It is central. My work is where I get to enact change to improve environmental conditions. The rest of my life is mostly about enjoying nature and learning from it.	Sustainability is living responsibly, in harmony with the rest of the non-human world.	We are not separate from nature, we are a part of it.	It is both. Science helps us to learn about how the world works, and find solutions to help course correct. The social side is accepting what we have learned and taking action.	I think green consumerism is still consumerism. Yes, I believe it is better to select products that do less harm to the environment. But less harm is not, no harm. And I have concerns that green consumerism is still contributing to environmental damage by allow over consumption of resources.	I don't really think about it	Yes	- Long / short form documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism - Others	It would be nice if all reporting included an analysis of the environmental impacts of the topic / product etc.	There needs to be more focus on "meeting people where they are at". I find that much of the media around sustainability is very value laden, which can shame people for not participating rather than encourage adoption of more sustainable practices etc.	The media should be helping people to make the best choices to protect the environment for their ability	
Participant A	It's pretty much my job - see above. (referring to their job at Concordia university)	Living as well as we can today so as to minimize negative impacts on the present and future natural world as much as possible.	Honestly, a big, easy one is to eat lower down on the food chain and focus on local as much as possible. This doesn't have to mean going completely vegan or vegetarian, necessarily, any reduction helps.	Both.... I think we have a lot [scientific] of the answers so it is more of a social problem at this point. Resources are limited, constant growth is impossible and yet our current socio-economic system is based on growth.	Every bit helps but the first R is reduction, then re-use. "Green" products can also be less accessible because of the free market system (less demand so higher prices) and it can be difficult to judge whether they are really better. Certification programs can help but also favour the rich.	Media can do the work of certification programs (provide reliable information about how "green" and conventional products compare in terms of impact) without the added expense that can make certification inaccessible to small, local business and the less privileged; help people make informed choices.	Yes	- Long / short form documentary - Traditional News	The growth model is fundamentally unsustainable. There are no easy fixes beyond reducing consumption, for example.	Should focus on mainstreaming social economy and reduced consumption in light of the above.	We need honest, unbiased (to the extent possible), courageous reporting on the above, reporting that includes solutions. I don't know how this fits into our growth economy though.	Good luck with this study!

Questions relavent to the study												
Participant Name	Q2. What is the role of sustainability in your life?	Q3. What does sustainability mean to you? Answer in one sentence.	Q4. What are the easiest sustainability practices you want the public to know?	Q5. Do you consider sustainability a scientific or social problem? Please support your answer with a short explanation.	Q6. What are your thoughts on Green Consumerism?	Q7. What do you think is the role of the media in green consumerism?	Q8. Do you consume any Journalism about sustainability ?	Q9. If you answered yes to the previous question, what type/genre of journalism do you consume about sustainability?	Q10. Is there one thing about sustainability you wish the journalism communicated rigorously ?	Q11. In your opinion, are there any changes needed in sustainability related communication in order for it to bring in the social transformation?	Q12. In your opinion what should be the role of media in creating a sustainable future.	Q13. Would you like to add any additional comments?
Duha Elmradi	It is very important in my life. I try my best to be conscious of the impacts we have on our environment and ecosystem, which includes how we deal with each other, with our economic and social systems and with our physical environment.	Sustainability means to me working towards decolonization and collective liberation.	Educate ourselves on climate solutions that are just and being able to spot and avoid greenwashing.	I consider it to be both, as it deals with the three aspects of people, economy and environment.	I think it is a good alternative for sure. But I think that it is still consumerism, and unless we tackle the problem of capitalism, which consumerism is an inherent part of, green consumerism can be inadequate. Sometimes, it is also inaccessible to many people.	I don't know as I have not seen a lot of media on it.	Yes	- Long / short form Documentary - Social Media Journalism - Others	I wish that journalism informs us more on real solutions to the climate crisis, instead of corporate-presented solutions.	Yes, more platforms should be given to Indigenous-led environmental movements across the world that oppose pipelines, mining and environmental degradation.	The media should be a voice of truth and facts and not a tool for propaganda.	No, thank you.
Olivia Champagne	Sustainability is central to my work and values, guiding how I build economic alternatives that regenerate communities, redistribute power, and challenge systems of exploitation.	Sustainability means building systems that prioritize collective care, ecological balance, and economic democracy to ensure long-term resilience for both people and the planet.	Beyond individual actions, sustainable systemic change comes from organizing for shared resources, democratic workplaces, and policies that prioritize environmental and social justice.	Addressing sustainability requires systemic change, shifting power away from extractive industries and toward democratic, community-led solutions that prioritize justice and regeneration.	Green consumerism can be a step toward reducing environmental harm, but it is not a systemic solution. Framing sustainability as an individual purchasing choice often reinforces capitalist consumption patterns rather than challenging the structures driving ecological destruction.	The media plays a significant role in shaping narratives around green consumerism, often promoting it as a solution while downplaying systemic change.	Yes	- Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	the interconnection between class consciousness and the systemic change needed to confront capitalism.	Yes, sustainability communication needs to shift away from individual consumer responsibility and techno-fixes toward systemic change, collective action, and economic democracy.	Media should serve as a tool for education, accountability, and mobilization, exposing the root causes of ecological crises while amplifying community-led solutions. Rather than reinforcing market-based greenwashing, it should uplift stories of collective resistance, & solidarity economies solutions	the chracter limit was frustrating short
Manon	Sustainability is an integral part of my life and always has been. I think about it in the daily habits and routine of my life- from what I buy to what I eat and how I clean my apartment. It is also impacted the university studies I chose to pursue and all the jobs I have held in my career.	Sustainability means making choices that empower, not harm, vulnerable communities and wildlife in our ever-developing, human-centric world.	Every dollar you spend is a vote for the kind of world you want to live in. While it is not our fault that huge corporations and billionaires are destroying the planet, actively choosing what you put your money towards can tell these powerful entities what the public cares enough to (not) pay for.	It is intersectional and cannot be siloed into separate categories of concern. What might appear to be a social issue will always have ecological or biological implications. What appears to be an ecological or biological problem will have ties to socioeconomic or sociocultural concerns.	Green consumerism was at one point a thoughtful and genuine effort to move away from highly polluting processes and products. However, the key word here is "consumerism", which regardless of how "green" it is, is the root cause of so many of our sustainability issues today.	The marriage between consumerism and the media is a highly problematic and effective one. No matter how "green" you make something, if the media is perpetually encouraging mass consumerism then it can never truly be sustainable or green. The media has long relied on unsustainable capitalism.	Yes	- Long / short form documentary - Traditional News - Others	If journalism wasn't so often politically or financially implicated then I believe it could have the power to truly encourage readers and the public to transition towards reducing consumerism and publicize environmentally and socially equitable businesses and choices.	If journalism wasn't so often politically or financially implicated then I believe it could have the power to truly encourage readers and the public to transition towards reducing consumerism and publicize environmentally and socially equitable businesses and choices.	Once again, there is mistrust in the media outlets people consume because they are often tied to a political agenda and funded by some dirty sources. That would be step 1. Then, step 2 would be to amplify the voices of sustainability advocates and grassroots movements.	No
Sheena Swirlz	I'm passionate about sustainability and the potential of new projects and energy on campus, particularly related to food systems.	Sustainability is about reducing output for ecological conservation. This is best achieved through community education and engagement.	Reducing consumption and waste output through conscious and informed decision-making.	Social problem. Apathy and convenience drive citizens to make poor decisions. Communities could mobilize on every level to create ecological systems, if they were informed, empowered and networked.	I am wary of this potentially greenwashing term. I would opt for something like ecologically-oriented.	To avoid greenwashing, mention pros and con of anything. Excitedly advocate for reputable projects, campaigns.	Yes	- Long / short form Documentary - Traditional News - Social Media Journalism	That voting and democracy are some of the most impactful systemic actions beyond starting new community initiatives.	Many sustainability messages focus on raising awareness, but awareness alone doesn't always lead to action. Communication should emphasize tangible actions that individuals and communities can take. A lot of sustainability messaging frames change as an individual duty.	Environmental movements often overlook marginalized communities, even though they are most affected by climate change and food insecurity. A justice-oriented approach should uplift BIPOC, Indigenous, and low-income voices, showing how sustainability intersects with social justice.	Using language that resonates with target audiences. Traditional environmental communication can feel technical or moralizing, which might alienate people. Instead, messages should be: culturally relevant, non-judgmental and accessible. People engage more when they see themselves reflected in sustainability stories. Highlight real local initiatives, student efforts, or grassroots projects rather than just broad global trends.

Questions relavent to the study												
Participant Name	Q2. What is the role of sustainability in your life?	Q3. What does sustainability mean to you? Answer in one sentence.	Q4. What are the easiest sustainability practices you want the public to know?	Q5. Do you consider sustainability a scientific or social problem? Please support your answer with a short explanation.	Q6. What are your thoughts on Green Consumerism?	Q7. What do you think is the role of the media in green consumerism?	Q8. Do you consume any Journalism about sustainability?	Q9. If you answered yes to the previous question, what type/genre of journalism do you consume about sustainability?	Q10. Is there one thing about sustainability you wish the journalism communicated rigorously?	Q11. In your opinion, are there any changes needed in sustainability related communication in order for it to bring in the social transformation?	Q12. In your opinion what should be the role of media in creating a sustainable future.	Q13. Would you like to add any additional comments?
Oliver de Volpi	I've been part of the department that has lead the university's sustainability initiatives.	Managing our footprint so that future generations can continue working in a similar way as we are currently doing and maintain an ecological balance.	Eat less meat! Know where your food is coming from and be respectful.	It is a social problem. If we all ate one less day of animal protein, the planet would already be in a much better situation.	I'm all for it but we need to manage the certification or labeling on more "sustainable" products.	The media needs to agree that we have a problem before they can play any impactful role.	Yes	- Long / short form documentary - Traditional News	How we are not currently living in a sustainable manner. carbon footprint, Social sustainability, economic imbalance, livestock, climate change...	The truth and scientific proof to what is being reported these days.	A huge role but right now we are getting opposite views reported about the environment and other sustainability issues.	No

Conclusion

This survey highlights the urgent need to shift the narrative around sustainability and to recognize communication as a powerful tool for equipping and empowering the public to participate in systemic change. Participants emphasized the importance of redefining sustainability beyond individual behavior, advocating for collective, pragmatic, and culturally relevant communication strategies. The insights gathered reflect a growing recognition that sustainability is as much a social issue as it is an environmental or scientific one—and that journalism has a critical role to play in shaping this discourse.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the small sample size, which was confined to Concordia University's sustainability community. For future research, it would be valuable to expand the survey to include sustainable communities at other universities, as well as scholars and practitioners in the field of sustainability.

Participatory Action Research emphasizes collaboration and co-creation of knowledge to address real-world problems. This collective approach is especially relevant to sustainability, given its inherently interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral nature. Expanding the participant base would allow for more diverse perspectives and richer insights into how communication can support transformative change.

There is an urgent need for more research at the intersection of communication, journalism, and sustainability. Communication experts must be involved in developing accessible, engaging, and action-oriented narratives that empower communities and support long-term sustainable futures.

Appendix 2

From Fiction to Function: Reimagining Media's Role in our Sustainable Future

Before Practising Sustainable Journalism, Understand How It Differs from Conventional Journalism

Preamble

Sustainability is not a new concept—climate change has caused the collapse of multiple civilizations throughout history. However, technological advancements and globalization have enabled us to transmit data and create awareness around sustainability more quickly than ever. This guide aims to empower and equip your audience with the information they need to make sustainable choices.

That said, the role of systemic issues in sustainability cannot be overlooked. This guide is not designed to solve these systemic problems. Instead, its purpose is to increase common understanding of sustainability and the importance of choosing sustainable alternatives. It is hoped that changes in individual perspectives can influence communities—and ultimately lead to systemic change.

The guide is divided into three parts:

1. Things to keep in mind before searching for a story
2. Things to consider while collecting data
3. Points to remember while editing

This structure encourages critical thinking and allows the journalist to form and reflect on their own opinions—something that will ideally come through in their storytelling.

What is sustainable journalism?

Many scholars have defined sustainability and sustainable development, but none of these definitions are universally accepted (Jabareen, 2008; Ruggiero, 2021). Sustainability is a complex term—while for some it means environmental conservation and resource

management, for others it may mean simply being able to provide three meals a day for their family (Kenter et al., 2019).

Similarly, sustainable journalism holds different meanings in different contexts. However, most scholars agree it should involve:

- (a) informing the public about the sustainable development crisis; and
- (b) offering solutions to help them make informed decisions.

Fischer et al. (2022) explain that the role of sustainability-related communication is to help people adapt to current and upcoming challenges. This guide further emphasizes that the goal of sustainable journalism should be to empower and equip the public to become changemakers.

What is your role as a journalist in a sustainable future?

Sustainability is complex, and communicating it is even more so. Our role as journalists is to present complex information in a simplified, accessible way. This can help shape public perception and empower communities to participate in building a sustainable society.

It is equally important to understand the sustainable technologies and practices that have existed for a while, but are still not widely adopted. This raises an essential question: what barriers prevent the public from participating in sustainable practices? Journalists must explore these barriers and offer realistic, context-sensitive solutions (Urner, 2022).

For example, if you are covering a healthy food initiative in a low-income neighbourhood, recognize that buying organic might not be a priority for your audience. Instead, suggest alternatives—like volunteering at local urban farms to access nutritious food, or highlighting “pay-what-you-can” initiatives run by small farms. Engage your audience with stories that reflect their reality, then connect those stories to broader sustainability themes.

Objectivity or Subjective Narrative?

Tuchman (1972) described objectivity as a “strategic ritual” journalists use to shield themselves from accusations of bias. He also argued that conflict narratives—particularly when presented as “both sides” of an issue—can create a false sense of balance, especially when one side lacks factual grounding.

Nisbet and Fahy (2015) support this claim, stating that such narratives “undermine overall public trust in experts and government officials and reinforce public cynicism about whether a problem can ever be resolved” (p. 225).

A qualitative study in Nigeria revealed that while journalists recognized the importance of reporting on the UN’s Agenda 2030 and its 17 goals, they didn’t necessarily see the need to bring their individual perspectives into the coverage—or grasp the broader importance of sustainable development (Obateru, 2021). Obateru argues that these perceptions inevitably shape public understanding.

These findings suggest that sustainable journalism requires not only a clear understanding of sustainability but also a commitment to letting that understanding shape how stories are framed and told.

Understand Your Audience—and What They Want to Know About Sustainability

A qualitative survey conducted with Concordia University’s Sustainable Community highlighted that sustainability communication must be both accessible and tailored to audience interests. For example, not everyone may care about the long-term impact of climate change on bird migration—but they may care about how it will affect food prices.

Sustainability choices can feel like a luxury when basic needs are still unmet. That’s why it’s critical to address the connection between immediate necessities and long-term sustainable choices. Always offer accessible solutions—especially ones that are financially realistic.

Sustainable Journalism Guidelines

Avoid using “development” and sustainability together. The current society is built on extractive and exploitative practices. Our progress as a society is measured with how accomplished we are in these extractive and exploitative practices. We define development as economic growth which does not have societal or environmental boundaries. We as journalists need to change the narrative of progress in order to move towards a sustainable society.

Before You Start Reporting:

1. Define your perspective and objectives.

Decide your perspective on (un)sustainability issues and then define the objectives of the story you are telling to address the issue. Remember, the goal of your journalistic practice is to empower and equip the audience to make sustainable choices for our sustainable future.

It is suggested that you choose an emotion you want to evoke in your audience. Remember: *“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”* — Maya Angelou

Clearly define what you are aiming to achieve by reporting on the story. Some examples might be:

- This story will create more awareness on the topic.
- This story will inspire people to volunteer with their local sustainable initiative.
- This story will inspire people to be changemakers and take part in creating a sustainable future.
- This story will inspire people to reflect on their behaviour and demand systemic change.

2. Align your objectives with your motivation for telling the story.

According to your objectives, reimagine the journalistic question. The objective(s) will define the narrative of sustainability-related stories, and the narrative will help you understand what kinds of questions to ask. Yes, ask the classic 5W and H questions—but also ask *“what now?”* Examples include:

- Which local initiatives will inspire my audience most?
- Are these initiatives or innovations accessible to all, or are they targeted at the status quo of sustainability?
- What’s the relevance of the proposed solution to your audience's everyday struggles?

- Is the solution a quick fix to the issue at hand or a long-term one?
- Am I doing this to change the narrative of sustainability, or do I just want clicks and likes for my report?

3. Consider the [conative](#) and cognitive requirements of the audience.

In our digital age, understanding audience perspectives and information needs has become easier through digital engagement. It is a journalist's responsibility to understand where their audience's interests lie.

Ask yourself:

- Are they engaging with the story, or are they just waiting for the next piece of information?
- Does the audience have the willpower to make the change?
- Is the change easy to adapt to? Is it convenient?
- How is this story beneficial to the audience?
- What resources do they require to make the change?
- What is the storyteller's role in making those resources readily available?

4. Take a solution-based approach.

Unresolvable problems and issues can create a feeling of hopelessness in the audience. A solution-focused story can reignite hope and encourage the audience not only to engage with the subject but also to take part in resolving the problem.

5. Depoliticize the story:

Governance of a country is an important part of making policy and making sustainable choices more accessible to the public; however, evidence has shown that politicking stories can create a divide in the public and make the problem look unsolvable.

Depoliticizing the story should be kept in mind during the data collection and editing stages as well.

Things to keep in mind while collecting and recording data for your story:

6. It's a collaboration—not just a story you are telling.

Let the voice of the story come from the person or organization trying to solve the sustainability-related issue. It is your responsibility to help people, organizations, and initiatives tell their stories. Representing diverse voices on the topic can make your story more inclusive and enriched with multiple perspectives. Remember, you're a facilitator—you're there to help them as a communication expert.

7. Frame the story correctly

You are actively shaping the narrative of sustainability through your work. Some things to keep in mind while framing your story:

- Use frames that are public-centric and designed with public welfare in mind.
- Use simple language so the information is accessible to the majority of your audience.
- Sustainability is also a social issue—treat your story as a social one.

8. Local and cultural context matters.

Report on local communities, organizations, initiatives, and people who are making a difference with their sustainable actions that are relevant to your audience.

While editing the story:

9. Use storytelling as a tool.

Communication for sustainability should not rely solely on complex factual information—it should reflect the emotional impact of the issue. Storytelling has been used as a communication tool since the dawn of time. Media has used storytelling to address numerous complex social issues and has successfully changed the narrative around oppressive practices. Use a storytelling style that resonates best with you and with the story. Your perspective on sustainability matters, and your audience will be impacted by it.

10. Consider how your stories will be perceived by the audience—and how they will affect them.

Remember: your goal is to empower and equip the audience. Research suggests that development goals (e.g. the Millennium Development Goals and Agenda 2030) are based on the perceived participation of civil society members who have the necessary knowledge, willingness, and skills to take part in the sustainable transformation of our society. Understanding your audience's perception will help you define the long-term objective of your journalistic practice.

Learn, unlearn, and repeat.

Sustainability is a constantly evolving ecosystem. To keep up with a sustainable future, we—as journalists—need to continuously re-evaluate our journalistic practices and norms alongside our understanding of sustainability. Learning, unlearning, and relearning should be part of your regular practice. Your understanding of the subject will define the journalistic practice style you choose.