

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

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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.

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