

# The role of constructive reporting in covering climate and the green transition in business communities



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## Table of contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	3
<b>Every reporter should know about climate</b> .....	6
<b>Audience is leaving traditional news</b> .....	8
<b>The constructive norms</b> .....	11
<b>Climate coverage seen from the business sector</b> .....	12
<b>Explain again, again and again</b> .....	14
<b>How to fix the normal reaction</b> .....	16
<b>Insights from corona</b> .....	16
<b>The use of storytelling</b> .....	17
<b>Maintaining coverage</b> .....	18
<b>The impact of media</b> .....	19
<b>What about constructive journalism?</b> .....	20
<b>The force of inspiration</b> .....	20
<b>Interview: A practitioner in the green transition</b> .....	21
<b>The act of balance</b> .....	22
<b>The risk of losing inspiration</b> .....	23
<b>Spot on the processes</b> .....	24
<b>Interview: Part of the core</b> .....	24
<b>Where does the media stand on constructiveness?</b> .....	26
<b>Lessons from newsrooms</b> .....	27
<b>Is solutions-journalism the cure?</b> .....	29
<b>An important element</b> .....	30
<b>To be or not to be activist</b> .....	31
<b>10 take aways</b> .....	32

## Introduction

"Dear Maria,

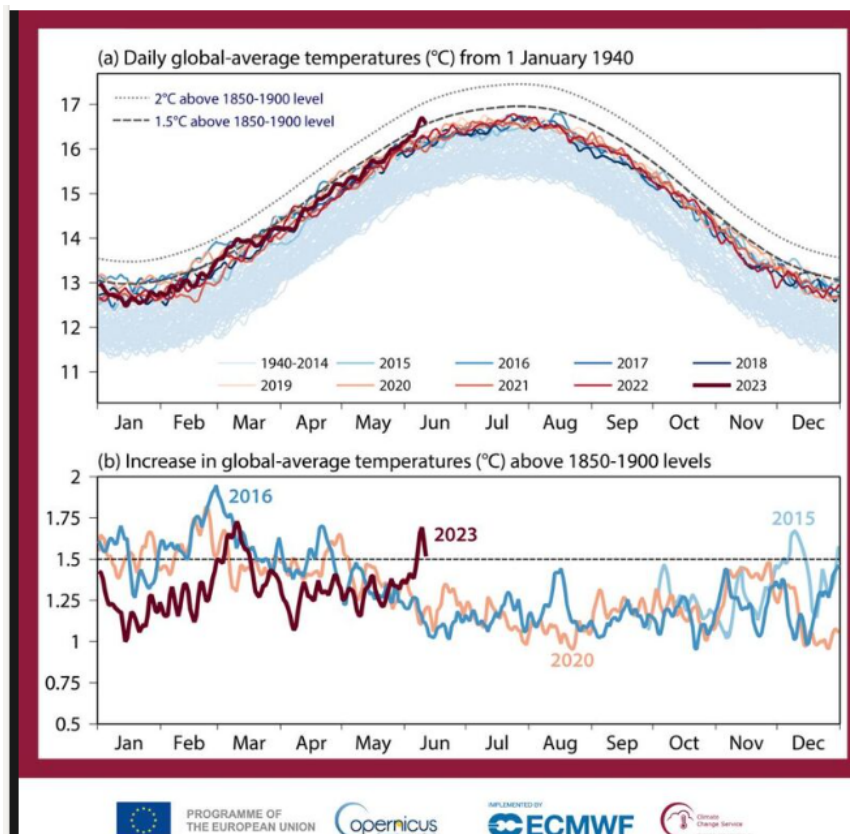
I am a journalist employed in your organization. Currently, drought and heat are escalating worldwide. In every aspect, everything that is happening is ominous."

That was the beginning of an email to DR's Director-General, Maria Rørbye Rønn, in early June. The sender of the email is journalist Iben Maria Zeuthen, who urges DR to take the lead. To clear all surfaces and focus on the climate crisis that all citizens on the planet are experiencing to a greater or lesser extent.

Subsequently, several emails have reached the Director-General from employees at DR, supporting the call "#clearthefrontpage - The climate crisis is the biggest problem we face, yet we fail to talk about it", which active stakeholders within the agenda are now trying to push beyond Danish borders, including through social media.

Iben Maria Zeuthen highlights a crucial question: what role can media organizations worldwide play in the escalating climate change, where the temperature is currently rising to a level out of the ordinary?

"We are hurtling towards disaster, eyes wide open with far too many willing it all on wishful thinking and proven technologies and silver bullets solutions. It is time to wake up and step up," UN Secretary-General António Guterres recently warned.



Source: Copernicus ECMWF

Despite the developments and numerous warnings from scientists, experts, activists, governments, and other stakeholders, the climate crisis still seems incomprehensible to many. Or at least, it is difficult or frightening to understand to such an extent that the necessary action and behavioral change are lacking.

So, what is the media's responsibility in covering climate change? Should we, to a much greater extent, utilize other tools in the journalistic toolbox, such as highlighting solutions, providing nuanced narratives about the world, and engaging the audience? And how do voices in Danish business perceive the current coverage? These have been the focal points of my project as a fellow at the Constructive Institute.

Why did I apply to become a fellow? As a child, I often "wandered around," as my mother called it. I would roam around our garden without a specific purpose, getting lost in the grass in search of a four-leaf clover or exploring the kitchen garden for sprouting plants.

In many ways, my childhood self-embodied the visions of the French philosopher Michel Serres, whose work was part of the curriculum in the course "The Long Term: A Sociological Perspective on the Climate Crisis" at Aarhus University.

In the early 90s, Serres published "The Natural Contract," where he was one of the first sociologists to address climate change and the transformations caused by industrialization, greenhouse gas emissions, consumption, and globalization.

He argued that humans need to rebuild their connections with nature, connections that have been forgotten by the elite: administrators, researchers, journalists—those who work indoors at a time when "we are physically touching the Earth globally for the first time, and tragically, we seem to ignore its response," as Serres wrote in "The Natural Contract," where he proposed an expansion of the social contract formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762.<sup>1</sup>

According to Serres, our way of relating to nature has become our biggest problem. Thus, we must approach it differently and see it as a source of life rather than an object to be exploited for our own products and lifestyles.

Serres shared his observations 30 years ago. Yet, it is only now that nature has truly become part of the public discourse. The loss of nature and species, along with the enormous challenges it poses to our planet, are starting to resonate with business leaders and politicians. In December (2022), 196 countries agreed on a deal called the Paris Agreement for Biodiversity, which aims to protect nature to a much greater extent than today.

While I used nature as something to lose myself in as a child, the pace of society has only accelerated, and the time for daydreaming is long gone. The pace is fast both in workplaces and in Danish homes. We must make the most of our time, preferably by engaging in activities that create value or promote learning.

This puts everyone under a certain amount of pressure. Some of it comes from society itself, and some from our own expectations regarding everything we need to accomplish at work and in our personal lives.

The same pressure is mounting on the media industry and journalism, where the development of social media and new media habits, especially among younger demographics, has necessitated a new business model. Advertising revenue is declining, as is the number of users.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Natural Contract" by Michel Serres, 1993

At the moment, artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, and other language models dominate the discourse. Developments in this area are explosive and raise concerns among politicians and even within the AI industry itself.

Additionally, there is internal pressure within the media industry: the race to be first, to get the most clicks, and to have the most angles on today's most urgent issues. The pace seems to be increasing, while journalists yearn for more time to thoroughly investigate their respective areas.

I love my work as a journalist. Gaining access to various environments and companies and uncovering issues holds great meaning for me. Since graduating as a journalist in 2012, most of my professional life has revolved around news journalism, which has naturally been characterized by delivering quickly, extensively, and on a daily basis.

It has been enjoyable and enriching to provide prompt coverage, whether it's about Maersk's significant investment in new ships or Danish Crown being accused of overstating their efforts in the field of climate change.

The pace of journalism has also fueled my desire for immersion and more time to absorb knowledge about my current field as a journalist at Børsen Bæredygtig, covering the green transition in the business sector.

Sustainability and the green transformation are already characterized by great complexity, where agendas such as circular economy, recycling, expansion of green energy, loss of nature, and reporting on ESG intertwine and place significant demands on the journalist's understanding and, most importantly, ability to communicate development, knowledge, and perspectives in a way that allows readers to understand what is truly happening in the field - and what is at stake for all of us in a climate and nature crisis that does not slow down on its own.

But time to thoroughly read a report or a scientific study about a subject is rare in today's news tempo. That is why I applied to become a fellow at The Constructive Institute in Aarhus, hoping for some breathing space to reflect on journalism, gain new perspectives on our profession, and have time to read in-depth instead of just skimming reports and flipping through to recommendations and conclusions.

Over the past 10 months, every week, I have met with researchers, politicians, media professionals from both Denmark and abroad. Together with my fellow fellows, I have gained access to voices that have candidly shared their views on the world, shared concerns, or interesting findings from their research. I have gained insight into troubling trends in media consumption worldwide, into the considerations of tech giants like Google and Facebook regarding future collaborations with the media, how laboratory animals in a basement under Aarhus University can pave the way for a new treatment, how being conflict-averse can lead to even more conflict, how human nature is initially inclined towards negative bias.

And the list goes on. It has been 10 months filled with knowledge and insights into areas I have not previously engaged with or have only superficially touched upon during my many years in the Danish education system.

It has been a year of reflection on my own role as a journalist and how I can do things differently when I return to my newsroom.

## Every reporter should know about climate

Journalism has been the filter through which populations around the world have formed their understanding and opinions for decades. One of journalism's most important tasks is to describe the state of the world in a nuanced, objective, and understandable way, so that our readers, listeners, and viewers, regardless of their educational or socio-economic background can understand various subjects and issues.

But it also requires that our profession allows time to become more knowledgeable, to find perspective or the surprising expert source instead of always relying on the usual voices.

In my view, the transition of the business sector is one of the crucial pieces in the coverage of the changes taking place worldwide. In several areas, some companies are ahead of lawmakers, while, of course, there is also a need for regulatory frameworks to ensure continued development.

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"We saw a tremendous need to make the public conversation about green transition much more concrete."  
- Bjarne Corydon, Editor in Chief, Børsen

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When Børsen launched the Sustainable supplement back in the autumn of 2020, it was based on the fundamental idea of providing inspiration to Danish businesses by asking about specific developments and focusing on the "how" rather than the "why." This was done with the intention that media also have a responsibility in this enormous transition.

"We saw a tremendous need to make the public conversation about green transition much more concrete. And much more focused on businesses. Those who act on a daily basis more than they talk. However, they determine whether the goals set by politicians and the engagement of citizens can be achieved in practice. (...) We want to spread awareness of new solutions while opening up the debate about all the factors that hinder progress. About dilemmas and significant obstacles. Economically, legislatively, commercially, in terms of management and technology," as Bjarne Corydon, Editor-in-Chief of Børsen, wrote in early May 2023 in connection with the publication of Børsen Sustainable Cases, highlighting 50 projects on green transition in the business sector.

Many Danish companies are aware that they need to change their practices when it comes to production, design, resource usage, and more. Some are well underway and far along, while others, especially smaller companies, still struggle to find their footing in the transition that will only accelerate in the coming years.

Today, this transition is considered business-critical at the executive level, making it a strategic priority rather than being driven solely by one or two dedicated employees attempting waste sorting or small initiatives in corners of the company.

During my time at the institute, I wanted to investigate how the business community itself perceives the coverage of their work on climate and the environment.

In constructive journalism, one aspect involves listening to users and finding out what they feel is missing in media coverage. Their knowledge and questions are used to tailor journalism, ensuring it captures the interest of the public or the target audience of a specific media outlet.

To sharpen the coverage of the green transition and climate in Danish business, I wanted to gain a better understanding of what companies feel is lacking, what, from their perspective, is working well, and how the

media can improve their understanding, description, investigation, and ability to provide insights regarding one of the most important stories in decades to come.

In my project at the Constructive Institute, I conducted 17 qualitative interviews with companies and experts in the field of green transition regarding their views on the development of media coverage on climate and the environment. Additionally, I explored how they assess the potential impact of the constructive approach. Some chose to be identified, while others preferred to remain anonymous.

Furthermore, I included media outlets in the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom to seek inspiration for new approaches and learn from their experiences in changing climate coverage in recent years. In addition to the interviews, a wide range of written materials were analyzed.

The coverage of climate change and global warming has fluctuated over many years, but in the last eight years, it has been growing and has become, overall, more accurate.

According to data collected from 59 countries worldwide by the Media and Climate Change Observatory (MeCCO), the coverage of climate science has increased from around 47,000 articles in 2016-17 to approximately 87,000 in 2020-21, as reported by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At the same time, research conducted by MeCCO has shown that the language used in media coverage of climate change is also changing. Data from MeCCO and the language learning platform Babbel, spanning from 2006 to 2021, reveal that more intense words and phrases are being used in news articles to describe the changing climate.

Terms such as "climate catastrophe" and "climate emergency" have replaced the previously used terminology, instead of "climate change". The Guardian actively chose to adopt this language in 2019, making it one of the first media outlets to do so.

Between 2020 and 2021 alone, the use of "climate catastrophe" in U.S. news outlets increased by half, while in the UK, its usage tripled.

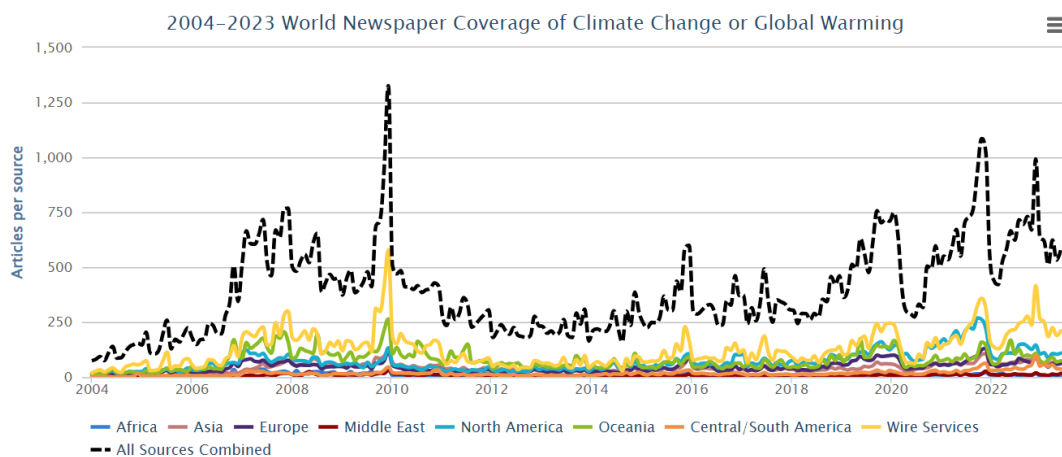
In October 2022 IPCC for the first time highlighted the role of the media in covering climate change and shaping public discourse on the topic.<sup>2</sup> In their report, "Climate Change 2022 Mitigation of Climate Change," the panel stated:

"Media can be a useful conduit to build public support and accelerate mitigation action, but it can also be utilized to impede decarbonization efforts."

The scientists emphasized that increased coverage does not necessarily equate to more accurate reporting on climate change mitigation, as it can also contribute to misinformation when reporters present both sides of an issue without considering the scientific consensus "This occurs despite increasing consensus among journalists regarding the basic scientific understanding of climate change."

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/10/1129162>



Media and Climate Change Observatory, University of Colorado Boulder, <http://mecco.colorado.edu>

Data collected by MeCCO, who monitor 130 media sources (newspapers, radio, TV) from 59 countries in seven different regions of the world. MeCCO is a collaboration between 10 universities from Europe, USA, Australia, and Japan.

Throughout my project, I have gained a much deeper understanding of the role climate journalism can play in the future. Climate change is at the center of every important story, regardless of your field.

It affects where we live and what food we can enjoy. It determines where the world's best athletes can compete, assuming their sport is still viable on a wetter, warmer planet. Climate change is a massive, systemic issue, but it's often perceived as boring or overly complicated to read about.

How do we change this? How do we make climate coverage a more prominent part of the media, especially when readership and listener numbers are already declining?

As Wolfgang Blau, Co-Founder of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network and Managing Partner at the advisory firm Brunswick, aptly puts it: "Everyone should be a climate reporter. And if you are not a climate reporter right now, you will be."

He emphasizes that the climate crisis transcends being merely a beat or a topic; it poses urgent questions that impact all sectors of society. Based on this understanding, journalistic coverage of climate change should involve all teams within a newsroom, including culture, finance, real estate, lifestyle, fashion, health, and sports journalists. Blau articulated this perspective in an article he wrote in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

By integrating climate reporting across various journalistic domains, we can create a more comprehensive and engaging narrative that resonates with diverse audiences. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of climate change with other aspects of society and encourages broader participation in climate journalism.

## Audience is leaving traditional news

The media is confronting significant challenges as people are turning away from the news. According to The Digital News Report 2023 from Reuters Institute, 36 percent state that they occasionally avoid all news sources, while others are attempting to restrict their news consumption during specific times or from certain news outlets.

<sup>3</sup> "If you're not a climate reporter yet, you will be: Covid-19 coverage offers lessons for reporting on the climate crisis" by Wolfgang Blau, <https://www.niemanlab.org/author/wblau/>

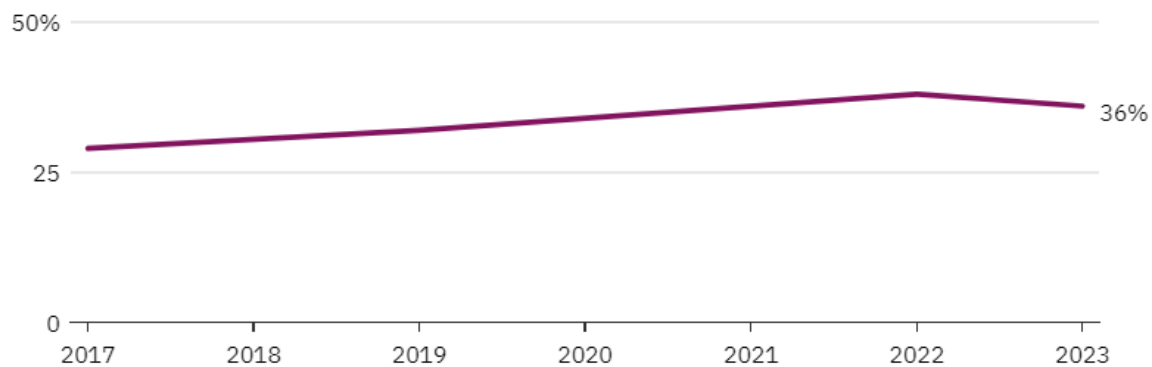


They claim that it is too depressing. They feel a lack of empowerment, and it impacts their mood. The survey reveals that news avoiders perceive a lack of agency in the news. Reuters states that news avoiders are more inclined to express interest in positive or solutions-based journalism and show less interest in the major stories of the day.

## Proportion that say they sometimes or often actively try to avoid the news

2017–2023

All markets



**Q1di\_2017.** Do you find yourself actively trying to avoid news these days? Base: Total sample in each country-year ≈ 2000, 2023. Note: Number of markets grew from 36 in 2018 to 46 from 2021 onwards. Markets listed in [online methodology](#).

Source: *The Digital News Report 2023*, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford.

According to the survey, 39% of news avoiders avoid news about the war in Ukraine, 38% national politics, 31% issues around social justice, 30% news about crime, and 28% celebrity news.

In the case of the United States, 30% avoid news about climate change and the environment.

A study conducted in 2022 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism revealed that climate coverage is suffering from a similar audience apathy or "climate fatigue." Audiences struggle to process information about the significant changes in climate, such as wildfires, floods, people losing their homes, and distant climate goals set for 30 years from now. <sup>4</sup>

The study, based on online surveys in eight countries, showed that people avoid news about climate change for the same reasons they are turning away from regular news. However, those who do consume news about climate change are more likely to find it empowering in some way and feel prompted to seek more information. They are also less likely to feel confused or encounter conflicting views regarding climate news, as indicated by the study.

According to the Reuters Institute, there are several approaches to addressing news avoidance:

1. Hope: Demonstrating that solutions are possible.
2. Sense of agency: Encouraging individuals to act.
3. Dignity: Treating people as valuable and listening to their perspectives.

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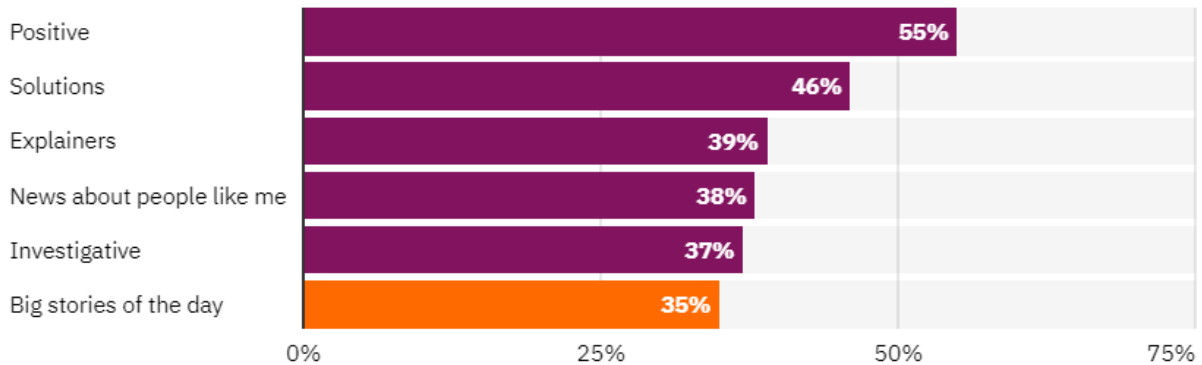
<sup>4</sup> "How We Follow Climate Change: Climate News Use and Attitude in Eight Countries", Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, December 2022.

Respondents in the Digital News Report 2023 themselves pointed out potential solutions to the issue. 62% of news avoiders identified the following:

## Proportion of news avoiders that say they are interested in each type of news

Average of selected markets

62% of non-avoiders are interested in **Big stories of the day**



Source: *The Digital News Report 2023*, Reuters Institute, University of Oxford.

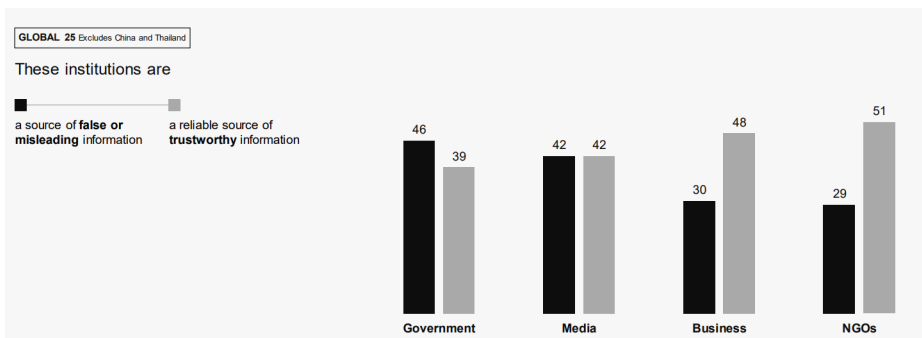
While more people are turning away from the news or choosing to avoid it at times, polarization among populations worldwide is increasing. The division in the United States is often highlighted in this context, where Donald Trump, during his presidency, fueled the growing distrust with his attacks on facts. This distrust erupted into flames with the storming of the U.S. Congress in early 2021.

The latest report from American consulting firm Edelman, which has been measuring public trust in governments, businesses, media, and NGOs since 2000, refers to a year of navigating a polarized world in its newest barometer from March 2023.

“A shared media environment has given way to echo chambers, making it harder to collaboratively solve problems. Media is not trusted, with especially low trust in social media.”

### Government and Media Fuel Cycle of Distrust, Seen as Sources of Misleading Information

Percent who say



Source: *2023 Edelman Trust Barometer*

So where does that leave the media in terms of responsibility?

## The constructive norms

The Constructive Institute in Aarhus, Denmark, founded by Ulrik Haagerup, points to the need of more nuances and solution-based journalism to create balance in the picture of the world that the media presents.

Critical journalism is very much needed, but when you have documented a problem, you also need to present solutions to ensure that the audience isn't left with the feeling of negativity or pure depression.

According to The Constructive Institute, there is a need to rethink journalism. It is necessary to present a more accurate picture of the world and not solely focus on the numerous challenges and stop there.

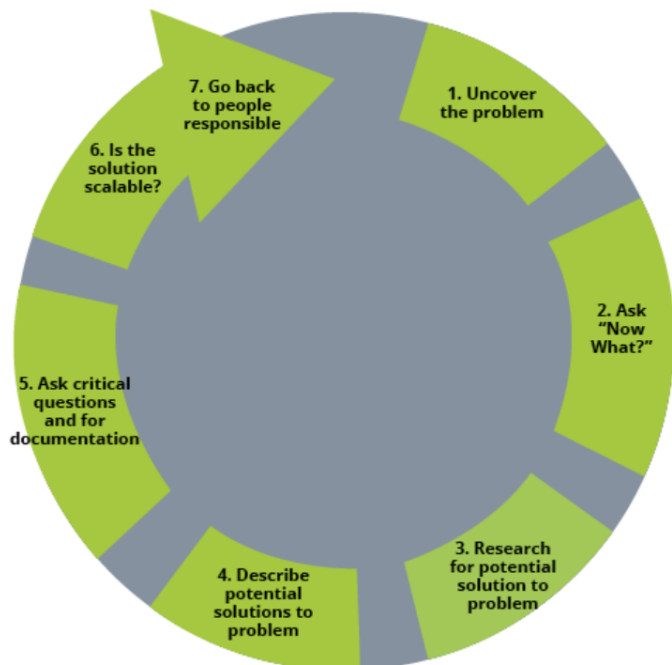
This approach often leaves the audience feeling helpless, leading some to disengage from the media and seek channels or individuals who speak a different language or perhaps only confirm a narrow worldview. In the worst cases, this contributes to the growing polarization, especially if the trend of echo chambers continues.

Constructive journalism, as suggested by the institute, can help counteract this trend. It is not a rejection of traditional journalistic values such as the investigative and critical approach but rather an addition to them.

When there is a well-documented problem, journalism should also highlight possible solutions and provide nuanced perspectives on the issue. Who has faced a similar problem? What did they do to address it? Can we learn from their solutions?

## The Full Circle of Reporting

This is the work flow for reporters working on responses to social ills.



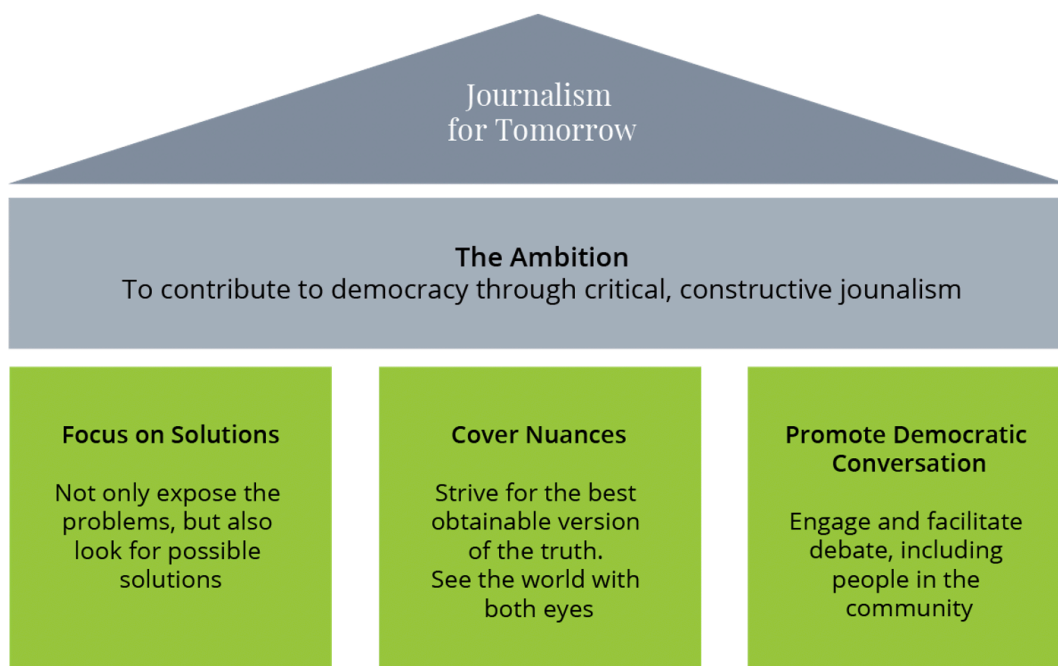
Source: *The Constructive Institute*

At the green think tank Concito, the constructive approach resonates with Anne Olhoff, an international senior advisor with a Ph.D. in environmental and development economics and over 20 years of experience in climate and sustainability.

She leads the work on developing the annual report for the United Nations Environment Programme on climate, the Emissions Gap Report, which, in short, analyzes the gap between the reductions that countries have promised and what is needed to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement of keeping the temperature rise well below two degrees and preferably at 1.5 degrees.

"The constructive approach aligns well with the discussions we have internally and with people from the media. It is extremely important to strike a balance between delivering a message that is quite bleak and not leaving it at that darkness. What should people do with that information? It leads to giving up, becoming demotivated or disillusioned, and some people become depressed. If you don't provide an opportunity to act, you contribute to something negative."

To make constructive journalism more tangible, The Constructive Institute has developed three pillars:



*The "house" of constructive journalism from The Constructive Institute.*

## Climate coverage seen from the business sector

In recent years, there has been a significant development in the coverage of climate change.

According to sources in the business sector, interest has been absent for many years. Even after the UN summit in the Brazilian metropolis of Rio de Janeiro, known as the Earth Summit, which laid the foundation for the work taking place around the globe today. It was at this summit that sustainability was first highlighted in a global perspective with the Brundtland Report, named after its chairperson, Norwegian politician Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Today, several companies refer to the definition in the Brundtland Report when it comes to sustainability: "Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Another anchoring point is found in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015, which many companies actively incorporate into their efforts to transition to a more responsible business across several of these goals, covering areas such as poverty, health and well-being, gender equality, climate action, energy, and life below water.

Lise Kingo has worked with sustainability and transformation for decades and is recognized for connecting an agenda that was unfamiliar to many to a vital part of the strategy and business at Novo Nordisk. As the CEO of the UN's largest sustainability initiative for businesses, the UN Global Compact, she has done the same for several thousand companies globally.

Today, she oversees the work on ESG (environment, social, and governance) as one of the most prominent professional board members in Denmark, holding positions in international billion-dollar companies such as Danone, Sanofi, Aker Horizons, and the chemicals major Covestro.

Lise Kingo refers to Mahatma Gandhi's definition of change to characterize the media's view or handling of sustainability over the years. In a somewhat simplified version, the politician and advocate for the Indian independence movement pointed to a curve of change that begins with lack of understanding, followed by ridicule, anger, and ultimately acceptance.

According to Lise Kingo, the agenda has shifted from being "almost ignored" since the Rio Summit in 1992 to a shift in 2015, when the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on climate with specific objectives to reduce global temperature rise by 2050 came into play.

"Responsible business was accepted as a strategic business priority. At that time, all planets aligned, both for the financial sector and the business sector, where the goals were truly integrated into business strategy," she says.

Several sources for this report point out that the coverage of climate and green transition has become a consistent part of the general media landscape, given higher priority and not just left to niche media or newspapers like Information, which have covered the subject extensively for many years.

"Lately, it's less alarmist. There was a period when it was all about polar bears. The whole phase focused on getting people to understand," says one source from one of Denmark's largest companies, emphasizing the need to now unfold that understanding when it comes to the loss of nature and biodiversity.

In general, the impression is that journalists have become more knowledgeable about climate topics, where previously it may have been necessary for companies to have an initial conversation with journalists to ensure a certain level of knowledge prior to an interview.

"I think the media has become more critical, and sustainability has also become much more nuanced," says Thomas Piper, CEO of brick manufacturer Randers Tegl.

Helene Hagel, Climate and Environmental Policy Leader at Greenpeace, assessed climate coverage since the last election and concluded in a column in Politiken in the autumn of 2022 that journalists' understanding and therefore their ability to ask critical questions to have significantly improved.

However, she issues a plea to the editorial boards who "both set the climate tone on the editorial page and determine the direction of coverage."

"They must, together with their journalists, take on the task of facilitating a necessary public climate conversation that paves the way for the necessary transition. The media must actively engage in the fight to rethink the structures of our society," she wrote.<sup>5</sup>

Lise Kingo, along with other sources, yearns for a more courageous press that orients itself towards the future and is capable of "explaining the context in a way that helps people understand what makes sense to do."

## Explain again, again and again

Communication is undoubtedly a significant part of the justification for journalism. Can we, as journalists, succeed in explaining and interpreting issues, problems, and nuances in a way that people without in-depth knowledge of a subject can understand the essence?

Climate change and the green transition are complex areas to comprehend, and if we, as journalists, fail to convey our stories, they won't have the impact or significance that all media outlets desire for their stories.

These stories likely play a crucial role in transitioning our society towards a greener direction and mitigating the climate and nature crisis.

"I believe there is much more nuance in the coverage now than before. But I also think it's important that the professional aspects are given space. That it doesn't become too shrill but focuses on helping everyone understand what it's actually about," says Hanne Søndergaard, Executive Vice President, Agriculture, Sustainability & Communications at Arla.

A massive global transition is underway, with companies being required to address their impact on the planet. For the last two or three years, the focus has been on climate change and the massive amounts of greenhouse gases that industries have emitted into the atmosphere through production, transportation, and the use of fossil fuels.

In-depth analyses of emissions are conducted, goals are set, and efforts are made to illustrate the path towards reduced CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gas pollution, and even ambitions for businesses that do not emit any climate-harming gases.

This is achieved, among other ways, through the renowned global initiative Science Based Targets (SBTi), founded by the UN Global Compact, the British nonprofit organization CDP, the World Resources Institute, and WWF, with a vision to establish a scientific foundation for private companies' climate strategies.

In a few years, the initiative has experienced a significant increase in the number of companies applying to have their goals approved. Currently, 164 Danish companies have either received approval for their plans or launched a process to achieve specific targets.

This includes major companies such as Ørsted, FLSmidth, A.P. Møller-Mærsk, and Nilfisk, as well as smaller companies like Elektro-Isola and Kiso, a Køge-based producer of butyl rubber sealants for various markets.

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<sup>5</sup> "Er klimadækningen blevet bedre siden sidste valg", Politiken, 2022

From a journalistic perspective, the coverage of whether companies can live up to their plans and strategies is crucial. This is also the comment from the companies working with SBTi, which is a very difficult task. It is a challenge in the work with Science Based Targets to convey this to a broader audience, explains one of Denmark's largest companies, which wishes to remain anonymous.

Here, climate journalists have a great responsibility to communicate this development and describe sustainability work correctly. Many readers are not deeply familiar with the more technical jargon surrounding the green transition, such as CO2 emissions, scope 1, 2, and 3, CO2 budget, and many other terms that find their way into the columns.

"For those who understand, it's very precise to say SBTi 1, 2, and 3. But getting it accurately translated is crucial," they state.

"All companies throw around goals for some year with a certain percentage. They do it in a way that suits them best, making them all sound incredibly green. But when you scrutinize them, it's relative to a particular year or with exceptions, so they communicate only scope 1. Now that there is a 'golden standard,' the media must explain it, use it, and hold some of the companies that don't use it accountable."

Many are calling for the green transition to be more tangible in media coverage, especially when companies present strategies, new initiatives, or other developments. What is the actual rationale behind this?

According to sources, it is often difficult for readers to grasp. One interviewee previously worked in water supply, and in his view, it is a simpler narrative to convey: "Trees are being planted to protect groundwater."

He questions whether the green transition can become as concrete as a glass of water.

When journalists have been immersed in a particular field for a long time, there is an inherent risk that they expect everyone to be familiar with the jargon, such as what IPCC stands for and the distinction between 'weather' and 'climate.' However, this is not the case.

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"Now that there is a 'golden standard,' the media must explain it, use it, and hold some of the companies that don't use it accountable."

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It is therefore crucial that we continue to explain the meanings of different terms and concepts and do so in the most concrete way possible. Wolfgang Blau, Managing Partner at advisory firm Brunswick and Co-founder of the Oxford Climate Journalism Network, highlighted this during a lecture in February 2022:

"As an example of a potential blind spot: not a single one of my interview partners mentioned or at least raised the question of whether their audience even the necessary basic knowledge of climate change has to make sense of the journalism they are producing for them," he said.

"Think about how often you see journalists refer to the 'the Paris agreement' or the '1.5-degree goal' or 'the IPCC'. How many percent of a news audience know what these words mean? This can get even more of an issue when US news media speak of the 1.5-degree goal — in a country that reports temperatures and weather up-dates — in Fahrenheit."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Climate Change: Journalism's Greatest Challenge" by Wolfgang Blau, 2022

While competent journalists are needed to cover the agenda, there is no expectation for the media to be experts in, for example, SBTi and to have an in-depth understanding of the initiative. Otherwise, the stories risk becoming incomprehensible, as pointed out by one individual source.

"The most important thing is to write in order to achieve popular appeal and raise awareness in climate coverage as a whole. Ensuring that it is readable and understandable is key."

## How to fix the normal reaction

A more concrete and down-to-earth coverage of the climate crisis and the green transition might also help break down another barrier for the field: getting the audience to read, understand, and engage with the stories to an even greater extent.

The past year has seen a series of unexpected global crises. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war has led to an energy crisis, inflation and major delays or outright shortages of essential goods that companies use in their productions. These are issues that need to be addressed now, which has led many voices within the climate agenda to fear a setback for the green transition and mitigating the severe consequences caused by the climate crisis.

As humans, we are naturally coded to ignore climate change, says Per Espen Stoknes, a Norwegian clinical psychologist with a Ph.D. in economics, who has spent years studying the barriers our brains automatically construct to avoid hearing about the demise of our planet.

Among other things, our brains are designed to ignore abstract challenges that are further in the future. The climate is changing rapidly these years, but for us Danes, the worst thing so far is a warmer summer without rain, to put it bluntly.

Even though we are informed of a food crisis in the Horn of Africa due to three years without a drop of rain, see images of extreme flooding in Pakistan and millions of people without a home, and even though we read headlines warning of just a few years to change our behavior, the climate crisis is still a disaster that is happening in the "background" or seems too unmanageable to act on.

To solve the distance the climate crisis must feel local, says Per Espen Stoknes. What does rising temperatures mean in a very local setting? The simplest psychological defense mechanism is displacement, which often will happen in terms of doom and stories about destruction and potentially death. A part of the solution is to show opportunities and hope and remembering the nuances.

## Insights from corona

During my fellowship, I followed the course: "Political Psychology of Crises" with Michael Bang Petersen, a prominent professor of Political Science at Aarhus University, who studied the behavior among citizens during the pandemic with high amounts of data.

The course provided insight into collective action problems, which both characterized the corona pandemic and is also one of the major challenges of the climate crisis.

Humans can change their behavior quickly during a crisis, which became evident with the pandemic and the subsequent crises with the war in Ukraine and the shift away from dependence on gas and the subsequent energy crisis.



When the corona pandemic spread across the world during 2020, the action from leaders, authorities and citizens came within days. An even bigger response is needed in the climate crisis. So, can we learn anything from the pandemic in terms of handling the changing climate?

*Some takeaways from the pandemic:*

- People need to feel empowered/agency to change behavior. It is not fear or worrying that does the trick, according to Bang's research. Inform them about their ability to act and what exactly they can do.
- The climate crisis is different from the pandemic. It is a social dilemma. During corona we as individuals could change the situation with our behavior. By keeping a distance, washing hands etc. less restrictions were needed. In terms of the climate many people don't see any private advantages right now because floods, heat waves or lack of food happen in other places in the world.
- We need to address that if we all do something, it is possible to change the development.

## The use of storytelling

Another twist is to use storytelling. Storytelling is something that brains do naturally and implicitly, says the prominent neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio.

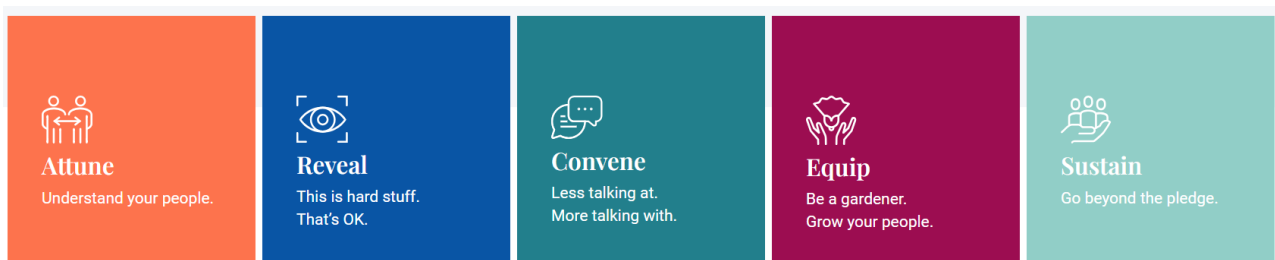
This knowledge should be used in climate journalism. Climate journalism needs to be founded on an accurate understanding of science and empirical realities but facts and information alone are not enough. As humans we need emotions to be able to react to the changing climate, which is difficult for many of us to grasp.

Cognition and emotion are impossible to disentangle. One never happens without the other, says Brandi S. Morris, Ph.D., Department of Management, BSS Aarhus University, who studies what causes people to change their minds and action in terms of climate change.

“Climate change isn’t a threat. It’s a series of many threats. Humans are quiet adept at dealing with threats when they have certain characteristics but unfortunately, climate change lacks most of them. Like an identifiable enemy. When it comes to climate change, in many ways, the enemy is ourselves.”

The American psychologist Renee Lertzman deals with climate anxiety and encouraging climate action. She has developed Project Inside Out, an online tool and hub that brings together changemakers, activists, and clinical psychologists to drive sustainable behavioral change on climate issues. One of her points is how we help others to act.

The hub has developed five guiding principles that might inspire the coverage in media.



Source: Project Inside Out, <https://projectinsideout.net/>

## Maintaining coverage

From Lise Kingo's perspective, business is all about anchoring the transition from shareholder capitalism to stakeholder capitalism.

Some call it regenerative capitalism, which is a much broader economic model that can handle other types of capital such as nature and people. The new capitalism does away with American economist Milton Friedman's idea that "the business of business is business", meaning that companies are only in business to make money.

"It's incredibly important in this day and age that boards are really committed to driving stakeholder capitalism. We've had a few years now where it has established itself as the new economic model. But it's like any new seedling: it needs help to grow strong. Otherwise, it's back to square one - and then the Sisyphean task can start again," says Lise Kingo.

"I can easily see how easy it is to slip back into the same old habits. How easy it is in a board context to say, now we have the occupation of Ukraine, the energy crisis, a completely different agenda, and now we don't have time for the whole new sustainability agenda. Now we have to go back to basics."

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"If we are not reminded of this in the general population, then you can stop and say, why do we have to do all these things and make this expensive transition? Why should I have a solar panel on my roof or a heat pump or drive an electric car when it's a pain in the ass?"  
- Anders Palsgaard, Chairman, Palsgaard

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However, it is normal for there to be a lot of confusion during a transformation, emphasizes Lise Kingo.

"When you move from one status to another, and that's the phase the world is in now. That's why it's important to keep the goal in mind so you don't fall back to the old status. To Milton Friedman. That's where the media plays a hugely important role."

Another important function of the media, according to many, is to maintain awareness of climate change and highlight what will happen if we do nothing.

It is the role of the media to critically uncover whether society is moving in the direction that has been set by politicians. The same goes for business and the many ambitions and strategies that companies are setting these years. Ultimately, however, "it's the job of business to make sure you do something. It's not the media's job," a source emphasizes.

But the press must stick to the agenda, even if other crises such as corona, the war in Ukraine or inflation arise, according to Anders Brix, chairman of the board of the ingredients company Palsgaard.

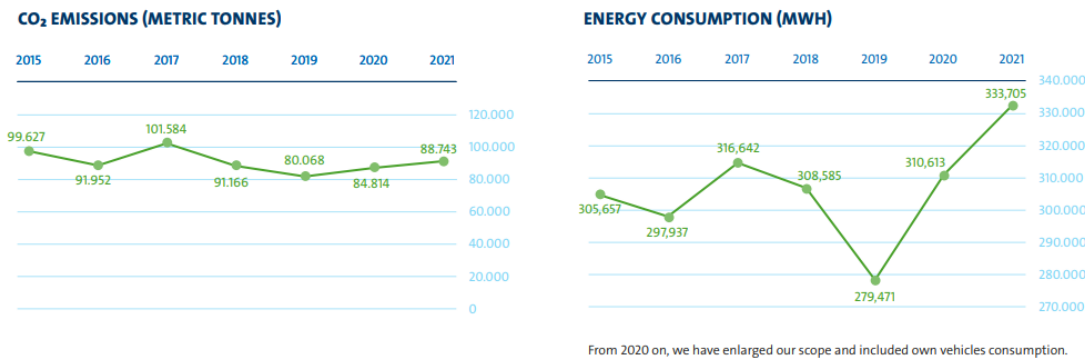
"It's important that we continue to have this media coverage and not just say, 'we've heard enough about all the catastrophic ideas and global warming'. You get tired of hearing about it, but I think it's important that the media keep pushing this agenda and say, 'okay, now a huge iceberg the size of France has broken off in Antarctica'."

"If we are not reminded of this in the general population, then you can stop and say, why do we have to do all these things and make this expensive transition? Why should I have a solar panel on my roof or a heat pump or drive an electric car when it's a pain in the ass?"

## The impact of media

One summer, one of the largest companies in Denmark got busy when a national media outlet focused on the company's ambitions to reduce CO2 emissions. According to the sustainability report, emissions had not decreased year-on-year. This was correct when looking at the graph.

But in the accompanying text, it was described that since the previous year, more elements had been added to the calculation, such as consumption from internal cars.



*Graphic from the company's sustainability report where the graph appeared.*

Calls were made, managers had to explain themselves in a case that, from the company's point of view, was not a story, but was based on a lack of understanding of the calculation.

"It's an example of how much the media can influence it. It was a non-story," explains the Head of Environment at the company in question.

"The other example is when the media gets hold of a real story about someone not living up to their promises, or a story where someone has actually done something that others can relate to. The media has a huge role to play."

Anne Olhoff from Concito emphasizes the importance of pointing forward instead of only at the problem.

"Both the media and researchers need to be aware of the role we can play in pointing to solutions and showing a way forward rather than just saying that everything is going to hell."

*What do you think about when you comment on a climate change report?*

"I think a lot about conveying a bleak message, where it looks more and more bleak in terms of achieving 1.5 degrees and that we really need to tighten our belts to keep it below 2 degrees. At the same time, we see a lot of positives. A lot of positive things have happened on the climate side for private individuals and investors, and countries are setting a net-zero target. We would never have thought that five years ago."

## What about constructive journalism?

Even though the climate agenda is getting far more media coverage than before, there is not much constructive journalism to be found in the columns, according to several sources in the business community.

"There is still a lot of talk about the COP (UN climate summits, ed.), the overall goals, the Climate Council, etc. It may well be that business coverage is more constructive. Maybe it is in general. I don't think the international political coverage is."

However, there is some evidence to suggest that there may be slightly more constructive articles in climate coverage than in the general news picture.

The Constructive News Lab, part of the Constructive Institute, is developing an algorithm that can categorize constructive articles at best. A special feature from Constructive News Lab's data set in the fall of 2022 showed that 30% of climate articles were constructive, while this was true for 19% of general news.

The study was conducted among 2000 news articles from 2019 and early 2020 from the major Danish newspapers: Jyllands-Posten, Berlingske, Politiken, Information, Kristeligt Dagblad, B.T. and Børsen. The algorithm used words like "green" and "environment".

But when the press write about companies that work with responsible business conduct, it can end up with a single spotlight on that company without putting the story into the larger context and providing an overall strategic perspective, says Lise Kingo. She misses the link to the strategic and the perspectives on the world situation when the more constructive approaches such as solutions come into play.

"It would be useful for many - at least at executive and board level - to be able to explain the strategic context in which everything is placed."

## The force of inspiration

The media's ability to create inspiration in the business community is highlighted by many. When the media uncovers how the green transition is being tackled in a company or municipality, knowledge is spread among actors who probably don't talk to each other daily. This can lead to more collaborations or further development of a product, one source points out.

"I wish the media could also be a source of inspiration. We also need to look forward, where we are heading. So that it's not just about the here and now, but what kind of journey we're on. That's where the media can inspire us; what solutions, ideas, projects are being worked on and what dilemmas are involved. They are there. And the media can help build bridges. If we talk about food, the debate can become very simplified and polarized," says Hanne Søndergaard, Executive Vice President, Agriculture, Sustainability & Communications, at Arla.

Another complaint from interviewees is that solution stories often put a lot of focus on technology and what it can do, but that they overlook the rest of the staircase in the sustainability narrative; how the new technology was produced, how much material is used, what about the entire supply chain for the product, biodiversity, and social conditions.

There is no doubt that electric cars are part of the solution towards a fossil-free society, but the nuances of the car's production must be included, such as the use of precious minerals for the battery and how much CO2 emissions are associated with manufacturing.

"Of course, you can't include all aspects, you'll never get off the ramp, but the integration of the crises we have, the big agendas.... Linking biodiversity with the development of green energy and the opportunity to create jobs, it sometimes becomes a bit gimmick-focused, where you miss some potential and a responsibility that lies with the business community to think more broadly," says one of the largest companies in the country, which wishes to remain anonymous.

## Interview: A practitioner in the green transition

It was images from Canada that made the very young Karen Touborg join Greenpeace. Images of baby seals being clubbed, skinned, and left on the ice. In West Jutland, she grew up on a conventional pig farm in left-wing Denmark with politically active parents. With an early growing sense of the environment and nature around her, where it was also out of the question to speak out about the chemical factory Cheminova, whose pollution back in the 80s still makes headlines today.

She calls it a time of change. And instead of choosing one direction or another, growing up made her curious.

"To listen, to try to understand and figure out how to make it move forward without going hard on this or that," she says.

This curiosity led Karen Touborg to take the basic part of the farmer's education in high school, after which she studied to become a biologist.

The practical approach from agriculture has been with her since she walked through the door at Grundfos 16 years ago, where she translates it into strategy. Today, as Senior Director for Environment and Human Security Health & Safety, she helps to nuance the work with the green transition.

"My work with sustainability has become more practically oriented than before. When we have meetings, I'm often the one who pulls the 15 beautiful slides into reality. I bring in a realism. A realism that can't stand alone, just like the glittery slides can't stand alone."

*How important is the practical approach in the transition from your point of view?*

"I have no doubt that where we are now, sustainability work is becoming more and more the work of the rain boys, with EU legislation in particular pushing things forward. It's good because we need documentation and data, but it's also sad because we're losing our footing. If we just uncritically use the templates that Boston Consulting or McKinsey come up with, the company risks overlooking what is important for our business and who we are."

*What are you worried about losing as a company?*

"Courage. If we focus so much on being able to back up our green claims with evidence, there's a risk that we don't dream big enough. And that if we do dream, we don't share it with anyone. I'm hearing more companies that won't say anything unless all documentation is validated by external audit firms. We still set the ambitions, but we also have internal ambitions that we don't communicate."

*Why do you see this development? Is it a consequence of the media's focus on greenwashing?*

"It's not just the media. It's also society, the EU and all the reporting requirements. The transition is not either/or. We need to get the data reported, but the pendulum has swung too far over. The media has a role in reporting on the solutions and so do the EU reporting requirements."

*What's the problem with that?*

"There will be a lack of role models and we will slow down the transition. Instead of having someone to look up to, it will be small steps."

*What is your experience of the media's use of constructive approaches today?*

"You see very little of that. It would be great if we could get to the story of someone who has screwed up, here's what they're going to do to fix it and a benchmark of how others are doing it. Or the story of someone who's doing it well, someone who tried but didn't have as much success."

"We've been talking about linking sustainability to the business model for many years, but what does that look like? What does all the blah blah blah mean, what are the concrete cases? The media shouldn't let companies get away with showing some glitzy slides. Instead, ask what it looks like on the production floor, what does a business model really look like, how do you calculate it? How do you find the CO2 emissions if a production moves from Denmark to Serbia, where the energy mix is super black, what do you do then?"

*What does it take to get better climate coverage?*

"I miss the perspective. What can be the solution to a bad story, what have others done?"

## **The act of balance**

While there may be more constructive narratives in business journalism or on climate change in general, another important consideration is whether the media is keeping the right proportions in its coverage and selection of stories.

It's a balancing act between critical, investigative, and solution-oriented journalism. Being the critical watchdog while pointing out potentials and opportunities. The reality of the green transition is new to everyone, one of the respondents points out. It's a long haul where business actors need to be adaptable because much of the work is uncharted territory.

"This should also be reflected in the coverage, which is very much characterized by what's fun, quirky and new instead of what really matters. What has the reach, patient owners, perspective, and economics to make us believe it will succeed?"

"I would also like to see journalism take a breath and say, what's really important here."

At the same time, several point to more focus on the documentation for a new technology or a company's work to reduce the impact. In many cases, the documentation is not yet available, but in the coming years, more projects will have data that is crucial for the media to scrutinize.

Agriculture, like other industries, is facing a major transition in food production. This year, the commission that has been working on recommendations for a carbon tax on the industry since 2021 should come up with these.

In recent years, CO2 taxes have created waves against the green transition in the Netherlands and other European countries. A backlash that also appeared in Denmark in early summer 2023, when truckers

demonstrated against a new road tax based on a truck's CO2 emissions and blocked highway exits. An electric solution is still not sufficiently developed for trucks for the switch to make sense, is one of the arguments for the protests.

A landscape with the risk of increased divisions between for and against initiatives in the name of the transition places even greater demands on the emphasis and, not least, nuance in the press. Arla, one of Denmark's largest food companies, finds that the media portrays the conflict between meat and vegetables more harshly than necessary.

"The battle between things on the plate is not necessary. But it can be celebrated a bit, and I don't think that leads to progress. It makes my husband think, wow, I can't be in that. Then he gives up. We must be careful that people don't stand because they get tired of the battle between one extreme and the other. And it doesn't have to be that extreme," says Hanne Søndergaard, Executive Vice President, Agriculture, Sustainability & Communications, at Arla.

It can also be between city and countryside. The city dweller thinks that the farmer pollutes, while people in the countryside think that the cities pollute.

"In reality, there is probably something that needs to be worked on in both places. It's very unfortunate to fan the flames of this conflict. Because this (the green transition, ed.) is something we need to work on together. Otherwise, we won't succeed."

On the question of balance in coverage, sources also point to the dynamics when a company presents something new within climate and environment. It may be a new goal or initiative where a company needs to be "armed to the teeth", one of the big players in the field points out.

"Of course, it's the media's role to check whether it's true, but I sometimes think there's a bit of a disproportion."

"If you don't stick your nose in, you can live a somewhat quiet existence, continue to smear or greenwash. So, there's something really exciting about that proportionality. Also from a societal perspective, whether you actually punish those who actually try, whereas those who maintain business as usual get a free pass because they just keep quiet or communicate to selected contexts."

## The risk of losing inspiration

One of the major agendas in the coverage of business transformation is greenwashing. It is important to dig into companies' statements about their efforts to transform their business and verify that they are marketed correctly to consumers. Examining the many promises, ambitions, and concrete initiatives and ensuring they are not exaggerated, protects consumers from being misled.

In 2019, the Consumer Ombudsman received 16 new complaints in this area. In 2022, the number increased to 95 complaints from both private individuals and organizations such as Greenpeace and the Danish Consumer Council Think.

The complaints have affected several of Denmark's largest companies such as Arla and Danish Crown, while car manufacturers such as Mercedes and BMW also have complaints handled by the Consumer Ombudsman. This development is being followed closely by the press, and it is necessary, several of the voices from the business community emphasize. But at the same time, they raise concerns about the consequences of the coverage.

That fear can lead to green hushing, where companies no longer dare to put themselves forward. According to several sources, as has also been uncovered in the press, companies are already holding back today.

"I'm scared shitless that people don't dare to come forward with the good stories that could inspire others. It's not the same as not covering if someone is greenwashing. But many people are afraid of being caught in a corner of 0.1% of a company that behaves properly and being shamed for it," points out Anders Brix, Chairman of the Board at Palsgaard.

He emphasizes that the media should of course be critical. But that there may be a need to properly check up on a case and whether it is "fair to run it with the breaking news bar, or should you make a story that describes where there is room for improvement."

Arla is one of those who are far more careful about communicating about the green transition. This is especially true when it comes to reducing the impact from suppliers, which is in scope 3. For most companies, the emissions in scope 3 are the largest and by far the most difficult to work with, because a change is dependent on other actors.

"We're going to go full speed ahead with that part. But we can't avoid being a bit cautious about talking about it. So, you can't really learn from us in the public sphere. And that's a shame. It's not just because you must learn from us. But our opportunities to learn from others are also limited. We must find our way behind the scenes, and that's a shame," says Hanne Søndergaard from Arla.

## Spot on the processes

Danish climate ambitions require political action. And ambitions, plans and agreements are continuously being presented within wind, future energy islands, being able to convert renewable energy to green fuels via power to x, while the waste sector and several other sectors must also be transformed.

But why are the processes moving so slowly, asks several sources for this report. Several call for even more critical journalism on what is described as the lack of action or known as the many processes that surround the work to slow climate change from a political perspective.

Others call it realism. Whether it is possible to capture CO<sub>2</sub> from, for example, industrial plants and store it in old oil fields in the North Sea. Or whether wind turbine manufacturers are even capable of delivering on the high ambitions for offshore wind presented by the government.

"Why is it so slow in the Ministry of Climate and Energy when everyone knows that we need to get started. Why waste time? Perhaps there are good reasons, but there are no explanations as to why it takes so long to tender the energy island or the next offshore wind farm."

"Can you challenge the administration to think more innovatively?"

## Interview: Part of the core

Camilla Hastrup Hermansen is Deputy CEO and co-owner of the more than 100-year-old family business Plus Pack, which produces packaging for the food industry. The company works to create solutions that can be part of the future circular system for packaging, so that plastic and other materials can be reused. Plus Pack's ambition is to transform the packaging industry and deliver 100% recyclable packaging made with zero CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.



According to the CEO, the biggest barriers to achieving this ambition are structural, e.g., lack of infrastructure to recycle plastics in Europe, lack of implementation of political promises and lack of demand for truly circular packaging solutions such as reusable solutions.

*What role do you see the media playing in the green transition?*

"The role of the media in the green transition should be the same as with everything else. A critical watchdog, and it's certainly my experience that many media outlets are. That said, I notice that Børsen, for example, with their various supplements, are good at highlighting the opportunities and potentials that lie in businesses investing in the transition. And this is positive, because I believe it can help promote the overall business community's interest in doing more and ensuring competitiveness in the markets of the future," she says.

"Many consumers and end-users, we all read the media, so all the stories that puncture the potential of the future also contribute to creating uncertainty. Sometimes I can feel that as an enthusiastic advocate, not only in my own company as co-owner and CEO, but also in other contexts, I can be a little affected when

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"Media coverage is a balancing act of being a critical watchdog, pointing out the holes in the cheese and at the same time pointing out potentials and opportunities."  
- Camilla Hastrup Hermansen, Deputy CEO and co-owner, Plus Pack

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this happens. For example, it may well be that we don't have the structures and systems we should have today. But that shouldn't stop us from investing in products that can be part of the systems of the future, which we must assume will be built. For example, the recycling streams that we are very concerned about."

*How are you affected?*

"When there is criticism that recycling will become more expensive because consumers have to pay higher waste bills in the municipalities, that is correct. It's not free to implement structural changes in society, and the media must present this as the critical watchdog. And they must also be critical of politicians delivering on the political promises and visions they adopt. But I hope that consumers don't get tired of the process."

"Media coverage is a balancing act of being a critical watchdog, pointing out the holes in the cheese and at the same time pointing out potentials and opportunities. I think that a newspaper like Børsen does a really good job in this area. Also, Politiken."

*How is that balancing act today?*

"I find it difficult to take an overall view because I'm so involved in it that I like the nuances. That you have the balance that yes, the world is changing, it always has, but what can we do about it? That there is a weighting of solutions that can be made and then information, which we all need after all. I think there is a lot of disaster coverage when I turn on the airwaves. That's the way it is, but I'm not sure that being hit by one disaster after another triggers us humans to do more or something else. It may be too abstract for many to relate to."

"Another leg is all these good stories about how local citizens take the initiative for small or big things that can bring people together, such as climate marches, etc. It's typically local newspapers that pick up on this. I think a lot of people are doing a good job. But I'm delighted when the media takes a swipe at politicians who sit on their hands, and there's not enough focus on the implementation of political agreements, such as green tax reform."

*What do you miss in the coverage of the business community's green transition?*

"I miss the focus on those who are succeeding with the green transition. Locally, there are so many companies that succeed in many things and can point to the future and could attach some hope and confidence to it. So, it's not just doomsday stories and political criticism, which I'm a big advocate of. I think it will create a sense of hope in the population, so that people don't give up and lose faith."

Camilla Hastrup Hermansen points to the example of following a package through the entire system. What is it turned into after use?

"The few times I've seen such stories, there's been a good response and people have understood how it's connected. So, I miss the link between the subject, the individual, and the company that facilitates it and the structural aspects of society. Getting it in and filling the real broadcast space is a piece of work you have to pursue so that it's not an add-on that's on the side, but that it's right at the heart of the coverage."

"You can equate it to the CSR-report, which has long been an appendix to the management report in the annual report, as long as it is, it's not part of the core. And it should be."

### **Where does the media stand on constructiveness?**

Throughout history, different journalistic concepts have ebbed and flowed. In the late 19th century, Danish journalist and editor Henrik Cavling was the main thinker in Denmark behind a more active journalism that moved away from simply describing and presenting developments in society, but also wanted to help solve problems or point to solutions.

According to a paper by Peter Bro, media researcher and rector of the journalism program at SDU, Cavling proclaimed that "journalism has placed its banner on both poles of the globe, and one might think that there was now no new land for it to win. But action-journalism opens new and unlimited territories. A modern newspaper, which might rightfully say that no aspect of humanity is foreign to it, can find new assignments everywhere".<sup>7</sup>

Cathrine Gyldensted and Ulrik Haagerup have each worked to develop the principles of constructive journalism. Gyldensted studied positive psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, and her results showed that the classical version that focused on the negative aspects of the story tended to depress the respondents. Instead, Gyldensted - in line with what she had learned by way of her studies – called for journalists to focus more on "positive, inspirational and solution-based news", Peter Bro writes in his paper "Constructive Journalism proponents, precedents and principles" from 2019.

He points to the fact that movements during the history of journalism have characters that align with the principles in constructive journalism e.g., peace journalism, public and solutions journalism. All concepts that during time faded again and this could be a risk for the constructive journalism as well, Peter Bro has stressed. There need to be a strict definition, which might not be the case now.

"(...) as the history of journalism has shown attempts to keep definitions open run the risk of making enemies out of both critics and supporters."

However, several European media are working strategically with the constructive movement. And it also seems to be the case when zooming in on the coverage of climate change. Recently the European

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<sup>7</sup> "Constructive Journalism proponents, precedents and principles" by Peter Bro, 2019

Broadcasting Union, EBU, an alliance of public service media, published the report “Climate Journalism that Works – Between Knowledge and Impact” building on more than 40 qualitative interviews and conversations with media leaders, researchers, and other experts.

According to one of the findings climate protection needs to inspire action.

“Today’s journalism focuses mostly on drama, omissions, and failures. Constructive and solutions journalism provide a way forward,” the researchers write.<sup>8</sup>

## Lessons from newsrooms

Newsrooms across the world, like The Guardian, Bloomberg News, and the Norwegian national broadcaster, NRK, have all changed their coverage of climate change and are experimenting with how to handle the beat in a better way.

In general, more reporters are covering the topic, and it seems slowly to be seeping from climate desks to other desks in the newsroom according to the report from EBU.

But there is still a lot to be done. The question is whether surveys reflect the real situation in newsrooms today. The authors behind the report point to the fact that more than 60 percent of media leaders from 53 countries who in December 2022 were asked to do a self-assessment stated that their organizations were doing a good job covering climate change.

About half of the 275 respondents reported they had installed a climate team, and one third confirmed they had a climate strategy in place. However, when the researchers had individual conversations with the media leaders, they “are a lot less bullish”, they write.

“Many editors, even those who take the topic very seriously, struggle to identify what doing a ‘a good job’ on climate coverage really means. And taking a closer look, holistic climate strategies which deserve that label are rare,” it says in the report.

The change requires a great deal of effort from the media, as well as training, education, investment and possibly a new mindset.

### ***The examples***

In 2020, the Norwegian public service media NRK established a new strategy when they realized that the “normal” coverage didn’t work for their audience. Their feedback showed that their audience wanted articles about climate, but they didn’t read them.

NRK reorganised its newsroom with two climate desks: one with a news-focus in Oslo and the other with a longer view situated in Bergen. They reset their climate coverage based on three principles: explain, engage, and create credibility.

It is a difficult beat to cover as it is enormous as a field. It could be easy to expect from the climate team to cover everything that has to do with the planet getting warmer, environment, nature and even animal rights, says Climate Editor Hans Cosson-Eide. But that would not lead to a better coverage. The climate desk therefore selects five to six themes to follow every year.

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<sup>8</sup> “Climate Journalism that Works – between knowledge and impact”, p. 152.

“Without a systematic approach and a team covering it together, it was based on personal initiative from reporters. Although stories of course were written with the best intent, our climate journalism was to some extent too driven by reports published by interest organizations or actors in the field that contacted us. We wanted to take a step back from that and try to define news coverage on our own premises,” he says.

He points to the fact that climate change rarely is breaking news and therefore a fantastic opportunity to work on own projects and find stories that the journalists and media house find relevant to the green shift and the public debate.

“That we take editorial ownership of it and find solutions and cases that fit into that story is important for editorial integrity.”

This means, among other things, that fewer stories are produced, but stories that are more engaging to readers. The strategy has had a "huge impact online in numbers" according to Hans Cosson-Eide.

“It is hard to measure, but when we measure the reach of the stories, we make on climate change on average over time and compared to other themes like politics, foreign affairs, and the war in Ukraine, if anything there is more interest in climate stories.”

*Would you say that you have moved away from the more dramatic journalism and into more nuanced?*

“Yes, but not forgetting the seriousness of the situation. When the IPCC report came out last year it is the gold standard of research on this. It is pretty dark, and we have to cover it in that way. We can write about solutions, but even that is fairly depressing. We need to take that severity seriously and then look at what can we do about this and to what extent.”

At the Swedish media company Bonnier, which either owns or co-owns many publications in Sweden and several other countries, including Børsen in Denmark, Martin Jönsson, Editorial Development Director, is also experiencing a great interest in the agenda among the users of Dagens Nyheter. According to Martin Jönsson climate and science have been one of the best topics to convert new subscribers the last year.

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“I have heard many editors and newsrooms say that it is so hard to get people to read stories about the climate, and we see it the other way around. These stories get very well read, so it is possible.”

- Martin Jönsson, Editorial Development Director, Bonnier

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“I have heard many editors and newsrooms say that it is so hard to get people to read stories about the climate, and we see it the other way around. These stories get very well read, so it is possible,” he says.

“The need to combine different perspectives from macro to micro, from local to global from cultural to business and make sure that all departments are involved is a good way.”

For instance, the sports department is now doing more stories on sustainability, such as whether the Formula 1 business can be sustainable.

“It is something that you can investigate from all department perspectives. It should not be a few reporters in a corner of the newsroom doing it; it should be something that affects everyone.”

Interest in climate and environmental journalism is also high at The Guardian. Environmental journalism converts new supporters at a higher rate than any other subject or theme according to Mark Rice-Oxley, Executive Editor for supporters.

“Readers feel this journalism is vital and important, and they want to make a difference - and supporting journalism that they believe in is something they can actually do,” he says.

Just like The Guardian, Bonnier has changed its vocabulary from “climate change” to “climate crisis” a couple of years ago.

It is important to have the correct language in the coverage of climate change, but without falling into the trap of false balance or “he said, she said” representation, which has been a point raised by several media outlets. Putting a climate denier up against a climate scientist simply doesn’t make sense.

However, it is not a duty for the media to report on the climate and nature crisis to "save the planet", according to an interview source from a Nordic business media outlet. But just like digitalization, climate and the green transition is a big macro-economic global trend.

### Is solutions-journalism the cure?

NRK has implemented constructive journalism in its strategy, and the broadcaster believes that constructive journalism should strengthen and develop democracy through, among other things, dialog, democratic debate, solution-oriented journalism, nuanced news, and explanation.

Several of the sources for this report believe that constructive approaches are necessary in the mix of journalistic coverage along with critical and investigative journalism.

But whether solution-oriented journalism is the solution to getting more people to engage with the material is still questionable.

The Guardian, internationally recognized for its coverage of the climate crisis, led the project "The Upside" from 2018 to 2021 with "journalism that seeks out answers, solutions, movements and initiatives to address the biggest problems besetting the world", as the newspaper put it.

Today, when the newspaper asks readers what they would like more of, a significant number still point to "less gloomy". According to Mark Rice-Oxley, who led "The Upside" and is now Executive Editor for Supporters, the environment desk is a very solutions-oriented desk. But there are caveats. Bad news is still "the bread and butter."

“For example, our piece about the change in the Gulf Stream almost caused the internet to explode. However, articles with hope and solutions are also very popular,” he says.

According to him it is difficult to prove that constructive or solutions-oriented journalism is the cure for news avoidance. Nothing in the data from the newspaper suggests that.

“Be careful about surveys. People say they want something and then their behavior show something else. But the tendency to avoid news tells us that we are not getting the mix right.”

According to research from the Reuters Institute, audiences say they want solutions and hope in journalism. The problem might be that they're not quite familiar with the concepts. But in general, they are interested in news that isn't all negative.

From Mark Rice-Oxley's chair, it's cultural, and it takes time to “change the culture in a newsroom and of a generation”.

At the same time, there is the risk of presenting a solution as something that is easy and thereby signaling that the climate and nature crisis is not that serious after all, Hans Cosson-Eide from NRK points out. It is often difficult to prove or document that a solution can meet the goals in the Paris Agreement.

“I think that the question of constructive climate journalism is quite difficult and something we struggle a lot with. We do want to incorporate some solutions and hope as well to our journalism, but in the false-balance way there is a risk of presenting this as something that is easy to solve and not so serious after all, because we have all these solutions as carbon capture and storage.”

### **An important element**

At Dagens Nyheter, the constructive approach has not been the standard practice. Martin Jönsson points out the discussion about the need for positive reporting in order to combat issues like news avoidance or reaching the news outsider. He mentions that initiatives focusing solely on positive reporting seldom have been successful. However, constructive reporting is a different approach.

“If we investigate areas where we have problems in Sweden from housing-situation, young people finding a place to live, problems with gang shootings; constructive examples from other countries, where this has been handled in a good way, are always well read. They reach out to the audience in a very good way. To have a pressing issue, being able to show ways of handling it and have evidence that things have worked, those stories are very important to do. That has been part of our natural newsroom-strategy the past two years.”

*Do you think you will do more constructive journalism the next five years in terms of climate journalism?*

“Yes, I think so. Especially an area such as explanatory journalism will be much more important to do on different platforms as social medias. I think that kind of fact-based explanatory tools that we can use lead to a more constructive perspective is very important. It avoids the bias, which I think is important in order to do more constructive journalism, but it also takes us away from the sometimes-negative spiral of the news cycle,” Martin Jönsson says:

“Constructive elements are very important. We must move from just reporting the facts and the severity of the situation to a more transition-based coverage. But in that coverage, it is also important to keep a critical mind to it. When we cover a COP-meeting, a political initiative, or a business initiative, I think it is more than ever a job to make sure that they are scrutinized and say, how is this leading to progress. The strategy is to not fall into the trap of just reporting what they are saying and doing, but really explore the effects of what they are doing.”

An important point from the sources is to treat climate change and the green transition like any other topic. To conduct critical, investigative, perspective, and solution-oriented journalism. In this way, it becomes compelling journalism.

“If the story is good, there will be no problem in getting people to read it. But if you become too technical or too limited, it is the same story as reaching the audience in other areas, where you don’t do the right kind of reporting.”

From a business perspective there is no interest in hearing about companies explaining they did something, but how much did it cost, how many years will it take to pay this up, the upfront investment etc. to make the piece and the work with the transition legit, the source from the Nordic business media underlines. But the need from the audience is there.

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“We know that despite being familiar with the issue of climate change most people fail to act on that information; so is the solution to keep feeding them the information they already have or is the solutions to give them the tools to act on the information.”

“Companies know this. You can say: it is important, it is important. They know that. But you also need to give them the tools to act.”

## To be or not to be activistic

Should media play a more activist role in the biggest story ever? For many, the answer is a clear 'no'. Journalism cannot be activism. Iben Maria Zeuthen, who sent the email to DR's Director General about having a much more serious coverage of the climate crisis, has emphasized to B.T. that her call for a specific coverage does not go against the journalistic principle of objectivity.

"The crisis is so big that we need to reassess what journalism is. It has always been the role of journalism to tell under-told stories. This is my way of telling it," she said.

Nevertheless, there are lots of examples of active journalism throughout history where opinions have been expressed or campaigns for a special case have been led by the media.

According to climate-adviser Wolfgang Blau, news organizations must include in their ethical code how to delineate between journalism and activism and thereby develop a shared language to discuss this whenever conflicts appear.

In 2020 the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter invited Greta Thunberg to edit a paper about climate with no views, only facts. It required a delicate balance which led to concerns both internally and externally. Martin Jönsson, news editor at that time, believes that they managed to handle “the dilemma of reporting together with a well-known activist, without becoming activists ourselves”.

“If you have engaged writers, who believe very much in the severity of the situation and are extremely interested in the green transition, we must constantly work with them to make sure that they are not perceived as activists. We must make sure that we have good editorial governance,” says Jönsson.

At Dagens Nyheter, the coverage of climate change has grown in recent years, with both the number of journalists and editors increasing. According to Martin Jönsson, this an indirect way of pushing the agenda because the media outlet chooses to prioritize this topic over others.

Both The Guardian and NRK also avoid the activist concept but point out that media must remain a bastion of accuracy and reliability for everyone to engage with. It needs to enable people to make decisions and have an opinion and to present answers to dilemmas that enabling the audience to participate in the public debate.

“That is how far our role can go,” says Hans Cosson-Eide.

“For us there has been a very clear line with activism. We can have events; we can engage with our audience. We can also have a goal as climate journalists that more people are concerned about this, read about it, and take it into their daily choices in election etc. But beyond that I think activism is something else than journalism that other people must deal with. If we did, it would potentially hurt the integrity and trustworthiness of our reporting, which is always going to be the most important thing for us as a public broadcaster.”

Marc Rice-Oxley agrees.

“We don't just want to preach to the converted, we want to reach out to those who are unconvinced, and the way to do that is via facts and good reporting, not emotion and activism.”

## 10 take aways

### **The critical coverage**

When other agendas such as corona, the war in Ukraine or whether Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen is on her way to NATO, coverage of climate change and the green transition must be maintained.

Media must do more to pressure-test the realism of the green transition. This applies to both business and political ambitions. Critical journalism is essential to ensure that ambitions and goals from leaders, companies and others are not just empty words.

### **Making the green transition concrete**

Coverage of the climate and green transition is often too technical and lofty to understand for the average reader who does not work with the subject. The green transition needs to be made more concrete and simpler, which is a challenge because the area is so complex.

When a journalist has been working in an area for a long time, there is a built-in risk that we expect everyone to know the lingo such as, what IPCC stands for, and the difference between 'weather' and 'climate'. And they don't.

Therefore, it is crucial that the media continues to explain what the different terms and concepts mean and to get the stories down to the level of abstraction.

### **The constructive approach - flip the narrative**



To re-engage with the audience, we need to learn about and test climate solutions from entrepreneurs; hear how cities try to overcome the threat from rising sea levels; and frame some of the benefits from the green transition, such as healthier lifestyles, and maybe a new way of thinking about the economy.

When a problem is well-documented, the media should turn to the solution and further investigate whether this could be any help in fixing the problem.

"I miss the focus on those who are succeeding with the green transition. Locally, there are so many companies that succeed in many things and can point to the future and could attach some hope and confidence to it," says Camilla Hastrup Hermansen, CEO and co-owner of Plus Pack.

A solution should be described in as detailed a way as possible. This will make it possible for companies or consumers to learn from the story. Maybe it could lead to new partnerships and increase the pace of the transition. Focus should be on the how and the perspective: is the solution scalable. How big a difference could it lead to in the big picture?

Stories about climate are often rooted in the rapid decline of our planet. But one doesn't have to use that as an angle every time. The problem does not always have to be the angle: try to rethink the story. Who is working with a solution that can inspire others?

### **Perspective**

Perspective is crucial in press coverage. Putting a development or ambition into a larger perspective is a standard part of the curriculum for journalists. However, several sources in the report encourage journalists to keep this in mind when writing articles about a company or a development. For example, the role of a major Danish company on a global scale, as Arla encourages. Or the Danish role in renewable energy.

"We would wish that the media would do a little more to understand the impact we have as a big company. It is big. Of course, you must be critical of us, but at the same time the media can investigate what the companies can do and how we can achieve it. The transition must to a large extent be lifted by the companies," says Hanne Søndergaard, Executive Vice President, Agriculture, Sustainability & Communications, hos Arla.

### **Proportions**

It can be difficult for the media to figure out whether a potential solution in the green transition is really as good as the sender claims. And the balance in selecting the right stories is crucial.

Today, several "fun" or "quirky" initiatives may be getting too much coverage, according to several sources for this report, who urge keeping in mind reach, owners' patience, perspective, and the economics behind it, i.e., the proportions.

Another point is to remember the coverage of companies that don't come forward with ambitions, targets, or new projects. The question is whether it's too easy to "fly under the radar" if you don't speak up.

### **Spotlight on processes**

There is a need for even more scrutiny of what is preventing the green transition from moving faster than it is today. What happens in administrations, agencies, and municipalities when companies come up with plans for solar cells or other renewable energy sources? Can the media challenge us to think more innovatively?

## **The risk of losing inspiration**

Greenwashing, where companies, politicians or others oversell their work on green transition and climate change, is a major issue in several European countries. Exposure of corporate greenwashing is crucial, but industry sources warn that fear is already deterring more people from sharing their work. However, there is no clear answer to how the media can address these fears, but a starting point is to be aware of the reaction and keep asking companies about their ambitions and the work with the green transition.

## **Lessons from newsrooms**

Media outlets should broaden the coverage of climate to more than just one science or climate desk. The topic should be the lens through which all journalism is seen. They should develop a strategy for the media and a guide to how to report.

In 2020, NRK established a new strategy when they realized that the “normal” coverage didn’t work for their audience. The newsroom was reorganized with two climate desks: one with a news-focus and the other with a longer view. They reset their climate coverage based on three principles: explain, engage, and create credibility, and today select five to six themes to follow every year. The strategy has had a “huge impact online in numbers” according to Hans Cosson-Eide, climate editor, NRK.

## **The false balance**

Media need to be careful with false balance. Science has no doubt: climate change is happening because of human activity. Media should think about sources and the journalistic reflex of finding opposing voices and seeking conflict.

The press is not here to convince people that climate change is real. “There is a growing audience out there who have moved past the debate of whether or not we should care about climate change, but just want to know what's being done to solve it,” said Sharon Chen, Managing Editor, Bloomberg Green, at a seminar in November 2022.

## **How to fix the normal reaction**

Three barriers help our brain ignore climate change: Distance, doom, and identity. To solve the distance reporters, need to make the climate crisis feel local - what does rising temperatures mean in a very local setting? The simplest psychological defense mechanism is displacement, which often will happen in terms of doom and stories about destruction and potentially death. A part of the solution is to show opportunities and hope and remembering the nuances. When part of our lifestyle is being criticized - maybe for eating meat or flying - it feels like our identity is threatened and therefore we turn away. Journalism can remind the audience that the world is entering a new face with e.g., renewable energies, maybe healthier lifestyles etc.

## Appendix

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