

Executive Summary

New digital-born media players, and particularly three of the largest – Huffington Post (HuffPo), Vice, and BuzzFeed – offer a substantial body of coverage about the environment and climate change, in which they provide a richness of format and thematic diversity which might otherwise not exist. They are very different to each other, but together they give room to societal voices which are under-represented in legacy media; they make room for alternative viewpoints which often do not come to the forefront; and they allow for informal and entertaining modes of discourse which are scarce in legacy media.

These three media organisations, which have gained a large number of users based on providing news via social media and the internet, have all become serious competitors to legacy media for news provision and consumption, particularly among younger age groups. In addition, they have invested heavily in different language sites and/or country-specific sites. In some countries their reach has overtaken established brands like the *New York Times*, CNN, and the BBC.

New data show that users most interested in environment news are more likely to turn to brands such as Huffington Post and BuzzFeed, with their popularity rivalling (and often exceeding) that of traditional news brands. Particularly in the UK and the US, the new digital players are amongst the most popular online news sources for those who are highly interested in environment news. In the USA, the Huffington Post has become the most popular online news destination for this group of ‘highly interested’, more popular than Yahoo, CNN, and Fox News online.

This study has concentrated on identifying the differences and similarities both between these three new players and established legacy media, and between themselves, in their coverage of climate change, which included news and commentary, video, images, and textual formats. In a detailed case study, it analysed how they covered the 21st UN climate change conference, known as COP21, which took place in Paris in November and December 2015.

A sample of more than 500 articles from five different media organisations (one legacy left-leaning, one legacy right-leaning, Huffington Post, Vice, and BuzzFeed) in France, Germany, Spain, the UK, and the USA was analysed in detail by a group of researchers. In Poland, around 60 articles were also examined, but of these, only one was from a new player (Vice).

The new players already have a strong presence in English and French, but in Germany and Poland there was very little digital-born coverage of climate change. In Spain too, Vice and BuzzFeed had very little coverage of the summit, compared to legacy players. Indeed, within our sample, traditional media organisations still accounted for about two-thirds of all the coverage of the summit.

In general, a complex picture emerges. On the one hand, the new players publish a lot of what they are renowned for doing: Huffington Post relies heavily on blog posts, Vice on ‘personal narration’ immersive video, and BuzzFeed on listicles, quizzes, photo galleries, and irreverent content. On the other hand, however, they all do a lot more than that, including a significant amount of straight reporting along similar themes and with similar sources to legacy media.

The three new players do not form a monolithic entity. Their offerings partly overlap with the legacy media’s coverage. In the Huffington Post in particular, but in the other two as well, many articles can be found which mirror legacy media coverage in their thematic focus, approach, tone, set of voices, and themes. Our main findings on the differences are the following:

1. Volume of coverage (news and commentary): In many countries, the Huffington Post has a similar volume of coverage to legacy media. In the US, UK, and France, Huffington Post has a large presence, providing a considerable share of COP21 coverage and significantly more coverage than legacy players like *USA Today*. In contrast, BuzzFeed and Vice News play a more complementary role to the information provided by legacy media. Their volume of coverage is lower, in part driven by their editorial and business approach.

2. Main focus areas: Huffington Post paid particular attention to the *opportunities* provided by taking action against climate change, such as discussions of the economic advantages of investing early in renewable energies and in developing a ‘green economy’. This was the second most important theme in HuffPo, appearing in nearly half of its articles. This is in line with Huffington Post’s emphasis on positive news or news that changes people’s minds. The theme of *climate justice*, i.e. discussions of historic responsibilities with regards to climate change and fair burdens for different countries in the future, was most strongly taken up by Vice, where it was mentioned in more than half of all articles. Vice also devoted by far the most attention to covering protest and rallies, which appeared, on average, in every second Vice article. The historically common media

theme of *disaster and catastrophe*, emphasising the negative consequences of climate change such as floods, droughts, heatwaves, or heavy rainfall, was distributed across all media relatively evenly. The new players also do not differ much from legacy media in their attention to the *scientific background*.

3. Amount of scepticism: There was little *climate scepticism* in any of the coverage, and no sharp difference in the amount of attention given to it or the wider theme of *scientific uncertainty*. The theme received the most attention in right-leaning legacy media, where it has historically been most present. But even there, it appeared in less than every fourth article. Left-leaning legacy media, Vice, BuzzFeed, and the Huffington Post did not pay much attention to it. Vice and BuzzFeed, when mentioning climate scepticism, even made fun of it in different ways. Overall, during COP21, climate scepticism was clearly subordinate to sociopolitical themes, and in some media and countries, it was practically absent from the debate. Even in the Anglophone countries, scepticism was not the major topic it has been at other moments of media attention.

4. Visuals: Visuals, and particularly the use of videos and photos, played a very important role in the coverage of COP21, for both legacy media and new players. The format of a piece of text illustrated by photos was the most common one for all of the types of media organisations included in this study. However, the new players were generally more visually oriented than legacy media. Vice and BuzzFeed in particular published more articles which were mainly based on photos. Also, the new players tended to include a higher number of photos in these articles. BuzzFeed relied on photos more than any other media: it maintained by far the lowest percentage of text-only articles (only 2%) and the highest of articles that were mainly photos. Moreover, BuzzFeed used a wider range of formats than the other players, like listicles, audio, and quizzes. This variety of formats was clearly an innovative element. However, in our sample, BuzzFeed did not publish any content that was mainly video. It did include video in about one-eighth of its articles, but this was a lower number than that of legacy media. Vice was the medium with by far the highest percentage of articles mainly based on video (15%), and was also the one which published more articles that included video (21%). Vice's videos were especially innovative. Its series of six episodes called 'Climate Emergency' followed an immersive style, where the reporter took the audience on a journey, through which the events could be experienced from a similar position to that of an eyewitness.

5. Opinion and commentary: Over half of Huffington Post's content were opinion or commentary pieces found in blog posts. This was linked to the finding that almost half its coverage of the summit

was from an environmental activist perspective. The stream of blog posts were often written in the first person and advocated a particular point of view or course of actions. In contrast, in all the other media or media types, the activist perspective accounted for 12% or less of the articles analysed.

6. Sources quoted: There was a surprising similarity between legacy media and new players as to the voices they quoted. Politicians, both domestic and foreign, as well as NGOs, scientists, and representatives of the business sector were used in similar distributions. Vice was the stand-out exception to this pattern: it most frequently quoted NGOs and common people – far more than the other media organisations, although it also frequently quoted scientists and politicians. NGO voices were commonly cited in all media, legacy and new. This supports previous scholarship that finds today’s journalists increasingly depend on international activist non-profits and NGOs to provide content and agenda-setting information. The voice of business representatives was low compared to NGOs. This may appear surprising, given the business implications of the COP21 agreement and the strong presence of various business groups in Paris, but their presence in the media was probably higher than at other COP summits.

7. Tone and language of coverage: The tone of the coverage was overwhelmingly ‘straight’ across all media organisations, including Huffington Post and Vice. BuzzFeed’s coverage was the exception, as roughly a quarter of articles were funny or entertaining and another 13% employed a mixture of tones, often funny and straight. Indeed, over one in three of its articles were either overwhelming funny, or had an element of humour in them. BuzzFeed was also the exception in terms of the language of its content. Nearly a third of its articles were chatty and informal, compared to a little over 10% for Vice and Huffington Post, and just 2% for legacy media.

In conclusion, taking into account HuffPo’s greater emphasis on opportunities and renewable energy, Vice News’ engaging style of reporting, and BuzzFeed’s innovations with formats and content, a strong case can be made that their collective presence is beneficial for public debate about complex issues such as climate change, particularly at a time when specialist correspondents on the environment are being reduced in some media organisations. It is possible that the new players fare better than their established counterparts in searching for new angles and new ways of covering the ‘old’ theme of climate change and, thus, in sustaining its relevance and interest to a wider public, and particularly to younger audiences.