



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# ESG journalism: bridging complexity with audience engagement

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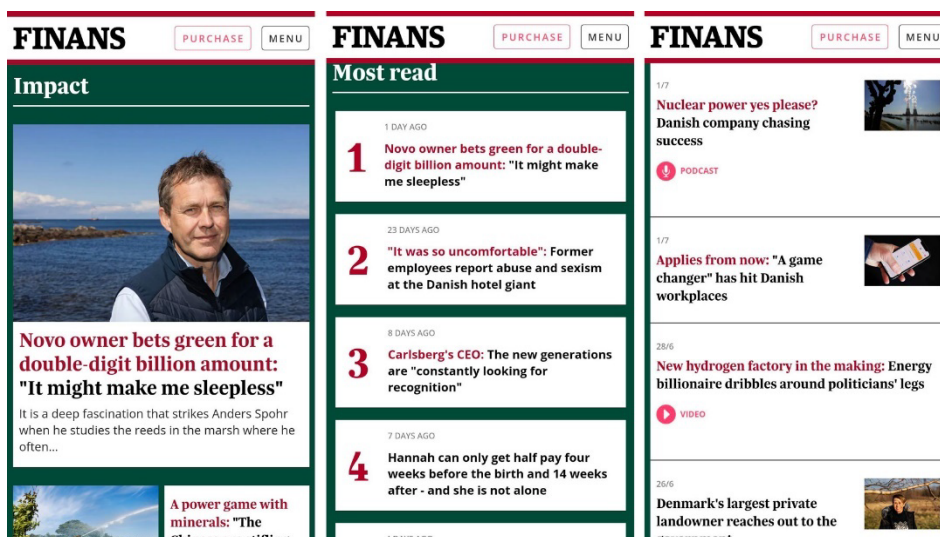
# Preface

This report was prepared by Signe Ferslev Pedersen, editor and journalist at Finans, a JP Politikens Hus publication. It is the product of a three-month fellowship at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, funded by JP Politikens Hus.

The project draws from interviews with media organisations and academic literature to explore the key elements that foster innovation in newsroom, and factors contributing to resistance.

# Introduction

When Danish business outlet [Finans](#) launched its new [Finans Impact](#) vertical and award programme in the spring of 2023, it aimed to attract business professionals interested in environment and sustainability issues, while retaining the loyalty of the Danish business community. As the appointed Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) editor at Finans, this was exciting news.



*The new Finans Impact vertical launched in May 2023. (Image: Screenshot)*

The importance of ESG for companies and executives is growing, and with climate change deemed “[the most important story in the world](#)”, prioritising this area was crucial.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite its significance, ESG journalism faces obstacles: the stories are complex, and often hard to relate to, requiring nuanced and comprehensive coverage. The report *Climate Change Audiences: Analysis of News Use and Attitudes in Eight Countries* from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that 22% of respondents actively avoid climate change news, yet over three-quarters are concerned about climate change misinformation.<sup>2</sup>

More broadly, traditional journalism faces a crisis of relevance. The Reuters Institute [Digital News Report 2024](#) shows a rise in selective news avoidance, with 39% now sometimes or often avoiding the news – up three percentage point from last year.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Weldingh (2023) Ph.d.-stipendiat: Hvordan kan vi ”rydde fladen for klimaet”? Politiken. Retrieved from <https://politiken.dk/debat/debatindlaeg/art9402434/Hvordan-kan-vi-rydde-fladen-for-klimaet>

<sup>2</sup> W. Ejaz, M. Mukherjee, R Fletcher (2023) Climate change news audiences: Analysis of news use and attitudes in eight countries

<sup>3</sup> N. Newman, R. Flecher, C. Robertson, A.R. Arguedas, R.K. Nielsen (2024) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024

To face these challenges, I interviewed 10 journalists at nine outlets in five countries to understand how we can tell important and complex stories in the most engaging way. I also drew from my own experiences as an ESG Editor and reviewed the latest academic literature. The findings suggest that adopting new formats, adjusting content to be more positive, and leveraging technology can significantly enhance audience engagement. This may have relevance for other subjects, too.

My goal is to provide insights that will help shape the future of how journalistic content is presented, ensuring it not only informs but also captivates and engages. Covering complex topics like ESG requires engaging audiences by prioritising and presenting content in an appealing, interesting, engaging, and understandable manner. If stories aren't engaging, what's the point?

### **What is ESG journalism?**

For the purposes of this project, ESG journalism is defined broadly, encompassing not only the sustainability and societal impact of investments in companies or businesses but also any topic related to environmental, social, and governance issues. This could include exploring how businesses are addressing ESG issues in their operations, policies, and practices.

ESG-related topics have become central to modern business media, intersecting with broader societal concerns about sustainability, ethics, and corporate responsibility. These issues play a pivotal role in shaping a more responsible and sustainable business environment. Companies, alongside the broader business ecosystem, are crucial in addressing the world's climate crisis; the actions taken in the business sphere related to ESG impact everyone.

As the demand for transparency and accountability in business practices grows, so too do the requirements for companies. Since the beginning of 2024, over 50,000 companies have been required to submit mandatory sustainability reporting under the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). As a result, ESG journalism now includes coverage of regulation, compliance, and reporting, underscoring the increasing importance of these themes.

However, ESG topics are not exactly "bestsellers" in terms of attracting attention or generating clicks. Danish researcher Line Weldingh highlights the tension between the commercial value of these stories and journalism's democratic role in informing the public about critical societal issues. Writing in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, Weldingh said this was one of [the biggest challenges](#) for Danish climate journalists.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> L. Weldingh (2023) Ph.d.-stipendiat: Hvordan kan vi "rydde fladen for klimaet"? Politiken. Retrieved from [[URL](#)]

# Reimagining journalistic content and formats

To overcome the challenge of engagement, media outlets are adjusting how they present ESG-related content. One approach involves making the content “less depressing” and more engaging for readers. Another uses different formats and personalisation technology to serve content in more palatable ways.

## Adjusting content

The aforementioned Reuters Institute *How we follow climate change* report found about one-third of U.S. respondents actively try to avoid news about climate change. Among those that refuse to read climate news around the globe, 26% cited the negative effect on their mood as the reason.<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is echoed in newsrooms around the world.

Sharon Kits Kimathi, ESG and Energy Editor at Reuters, recognises the trends described in the study. “I do think that there is climate fatigue,” she told me. “Why would someone click on sad news?”

Like many other editors, Kits Kimathi has adjusted ESG-related content at Reuters after an audience survey revealed a preference for more multimedia-based, solution-oriented content with a positive spin.

Similarly, at the BBC, climate editor Justin Rowlatt is aware of the challenge in attracting readers to complex ESG stories. He explained: “We’ve got the growing issue with news avoidance and people saying everything is too depressing and they don’t want to engage with it”.

To combat this, Rowlatt has shifted the focus slightly, emphasizing positive developments and innovations in the climate space. Research supports this approach; studies on solutions-oriented journalism have shown that constructive news generates lower levels of negative emotions and higher levels of positive and inspired responses.<sup>6</sup> Millennials, in particular, tend to “like” constructive news stories more frequently.

However, as Kits Kimathi emphasised, it remains crucial to cover critical topics such as extreme heat, droughts, and humanitarian crises. “It’s a tough one to balance,” she said. But a balanced approach ensures that essential, albeit distressing, issues

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<sup>5</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>6</sup> L. Hermans and T. Prins. (2022). Interest matters: The effect of constructive news reporting on Millennials’ emotions and engagement. *Journalism* 23(5), 1064-1081

receive the attention they need while also highlighting solutions and fostering more positive engagement with the news.

The complexity of ESG topics doesn't mean people are entirely disinterested in this content by default. On the contrary, audiences think journalism that provides perspective and education is very important. When the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024 asked survey respondents to rate the importance of different content targets, the following three ranked most highly:

- “Update me” (72%)
- “Educate me” (67%)
- “Give me perspective” (63%)

In relation to ESG journalism these findings suggest there is potential for educational content that enhances understanding of complex topics, and that providing perspective on ESG issues is valuable, too. But how we package the content that meets those needs matters.

### **Journalistic formats**

“The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing,” wrote Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their book, *The Elements of Journalism*.<sup>7</sup>

In the scope of that definition, journalism has responsibilities to inform the public, serve as watchdogs over those in power, and convey insight and context to current events, among other key tasks. But there's no prescribed format for doing so.

Generation X remembers when people tuned into a TV or radio newscast, or bought a printed newspaper – with its features, down-pagers, columns, briefs and sidebars – for journalism. Today there are many more media and formats to choose from. The Reuters Institute's [Trends and Predictions 2024](#) report, found video, newsletters, and podcast are all gaining ground. “Some publishers talk of this format shift as a ‘second phase’ in the digital revolution because, for many legacy newsrooms, it will require a significant cultural shift away from text towards multimedia production”.<sup>8</sup>

Journalism is also presented in these new media in various formats: from infographics to news games, personalised storytelling to embedded audio, video, and live blogging formats, to name a few.

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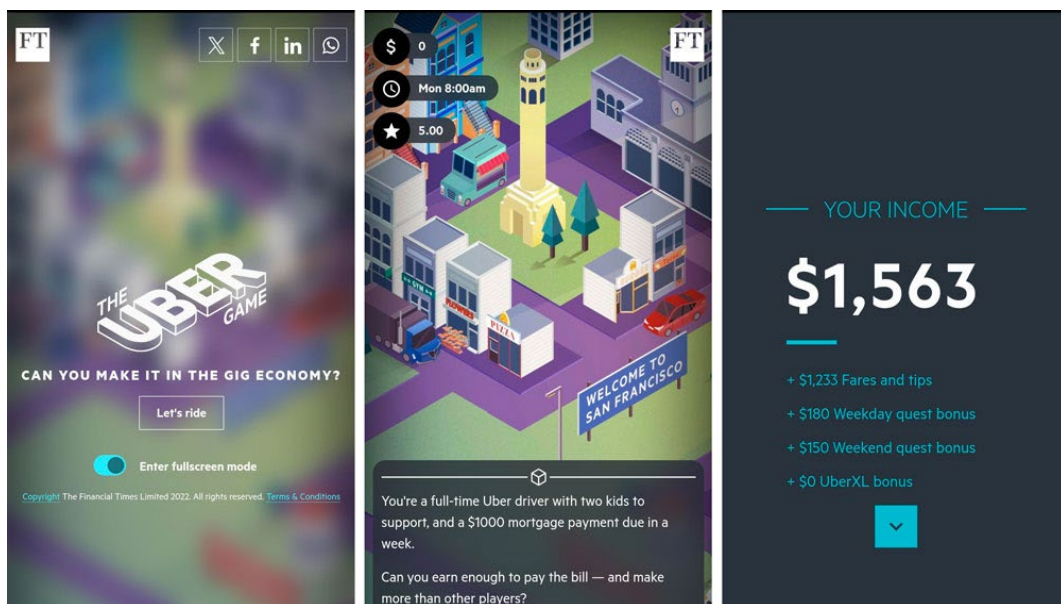
<sup>7</sup> Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2021). *The Elements of Journalism*, revised and updated 4th edition: What newspeople should know and the public should expect. Crown.

<sup>8</sup> N. Newman (2024) *Journalism, Media, and Technology Trends and Predictions 2024*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism [[URL](#)]

Journalism isn't always presented under the banner of traditional media branding either. Hugo Travers, for example, is a French journalist offering daily news updates on his HugoDécrypte channels on YouTube and TikTok with 2.83 million subscribers. When asked by the Digital News Report to name news sources, French survey respondents mentioned him more frequently than traditional French newspapers *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Liberation* combined.<sup>9</sup> It is a trend repeated in other countries that underscores how journalism has extended beyond traditional boundaries. This should serve as a clear call for traditional outlets to explore alternative approaches.

While there are already sporadic efforts, many news organisations have yet to fully explore a wide range of new formats. According to Robin Kwong, director of data services at Yahoo News and former director of Audience Loyalty at the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), where he has also been Newsroom Innovation Chief and New Formats Editor, there is still an extensive amount of unexplored potential in this area.

Before working at WSJ, Kwong was at the *Financial Times*, where he, among other things, kickstarted the use of gamified news content with [The Uber Game](#), an award-winning news experience that let audiences learn about the gig economy while attempting to rack up \$1,000 as an Uber driver.



Screenshots from Kwong's Uber driver game for the *Financial Times*, which drew more than half a million players. (Image: Screenshot)

Kwong believes traditional ideas about the concept of journalism may be hindering innovation in the industry. Were our understanding broadened from "journalism"

<sup>9</sup> N. Newman, R. Flecher, C. Robertson, A.R. Arguedas, R.K. Nielsen (2024) Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024, p 55.



to “information services”, he argued, our scope would become a lot wider and potentially more interesting things could happen.

Take news games for example, which can help people better understand systems and systemic forces, such as reaching [Net Zero](#). While traditional news articles report on events as they happen, they are less effective at showing how different parts of a system interconnect and influence each other. News games excel in this area by providing an immersive experience. For example, the *Financial Times* created another game that asked readers [Can you reach net zero by 2050?](#), which helped readers grasp the ins and outs of cutting emissions.<sup>10</sup> Games where players make decisions as if they were someone else offer an engaging, immersive element.

“This approach fosters empathy by allowing players to step into someone else’s shoes and experience their perspective,” said Robin Kwong.

Research suggests journalism formats will require a different mindset to meet the needs of younger audiences. Take video, for example: [Next Gen News – Understanding the audience of 2030](#) suggests the future of video, a format on the rise in 2024, will not be one, singular format. Instead, younger news consumers want it to be intertwined with text (like quotes, reactions, comments), imagery (pictures, data graphics) and/or audio (quotes, samples, music) to create a dynamic storytelling and media experience.<sup>11</sup>

### **Why innovate?**

To the question of why the media industry needs to innovate and find new ways to tell stories, Robin Kwong responded: “Why not?”

Imagine having had a toolkit with only one pencil. Suddenly the toolkit is full of various tools – some familiar, some unfamiliar. Wouldn’t you want to try these tools, or at least find out how they work?

Journalism has moved a long way on from when stories were presented on paper, film or airways as a one-way transmission. Today, it is both possible and necessary to reach out and engage audiences in a conversation using new digital tools. Effective journalism needs to meet the audience where they are, in formats that are suited to various digital channels.

Another reason to innovate is that changes in technology have changed people’s behaviour and expectations. According to Kwong, if news media outlets just keep on

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<sup>10</sup> Financial Times. (2022) The Climate Game: Can you reach net zero by 2050? Available at: <https://ig.ft.com/climate-game/>

<sup>11</sup> Next Gen News – Understanding the audiences of 2030, researched and produced by FT Strategies and Knight Lab

producing traditional articles or traditional formats there is a greater danger that the information will be extracted and presented more engagingly by someone else.

“I think that basically it’s important in this moment because all of our competitors – all of the platforms, who are competing for attention – are competing on the presentation of information,” said Kwong.

When Google gives you a generative summary of an article on search, said Kwong, it is because Google thinks that is a more useful presentation of the information to the user than the article. So why not just make the summary to begin with?

That’s the idea behind Axios, an American news website founded in 2017 that hoped to revolutionise the formats in which news information is presented. Today, Axios is known for presenting news in bullet points, and in articles that are always shorter than 300 words. The format has enabled Axios to establish itself in a crowded marketplace, the CEO is already thinking about new ways to evolve in response to the release of generative AI tools.

Speaking in an interview with the [New York Times](#) in April 2024, Axios chief executive Jim VandeHei said artificial intelligence will “eviscerate the weak, the ordinary, the unprepared in media” and that his outlet needed to redefine their strategy to focus more on human-centric content and experiences.<sup>12</sup>

As part of the new strategy, Axios will invest in more live events, a membership programme centred around its star journalists, and an expansion of its high-end subscription newsletter. He continued: “We’re in the middle of a very fundamental shift in how people relate to news and information, as profound, if not more profound, than moving from print to digital”.

Kwong agreed there is a greater need now to think of different forms of interaction – either as a more efficient way of giving people the information, but also perhaps more importantly, to build new types of relationships with the audiences.

“If your relationship with your reader is simply based on them coming in to read an article, that behaviour might be going away. So you need other ways to form a relationship with your audiences,” he said.

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<sup>12</sup> Grynbaum, M. M. (2024) 'Axios shifts strategy amid AI concerns, says CEO Jim VandeHei', *The New York Times*, 11 April. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/business/media/axios-ai-strategy.html>

## Trial and error

Experimenting may come more naturally to new, smaller newsrooms than old legacy organisation who are expected to maintain the *status quo* rather than risk their loyal but aging customer base.

Sannuta Raghu leads the AI group at Indian digital news publication [Scroll](#). She is currently working on a project mapping journalistic formats to lay the groundwork for a machine learning model that will correlate with user behaviour to present each user with the format best suited to their needs. A traditional article (say 800 to 2,000 words long), which Scroll's core and loyal audience already consumes, would serve as the "raw material" to create alternative formats for casual or newer audiences.

"Once we have enough user data and understand user behaviour better, then we can target specific formats to cohorts, which means that if you are regular on our site, and I know that you prefer audio FAQs, or you prefer five-point summaries for a particular type of story, then I just have to ask you if you would like to read this as summary and then you just click 'yes' and go forward," Raghu explained. It's an ambitious project for such a small team, but Raghu said it is essential to experiment.

Indeed, it was a lack of time and money that spurred Raghu's team to explore AI solutions that might make their offering more versatile without adding additional resources. "That would give the staff the opportunity to focus on the creative aspects of the journalism workflow, while all the repetitive tasks can be done by software, essentially," she said.

## The future of new formats

In the future, Kwong predicts many news organisations will be where reporting and fact-checking happens, but the actual presentation of the content will be managed elsewhere by specialist entities and technologies.

Generative AI has the potential to revolutionise journalism by making it more personalised, efficient, and interactive – ultimately enhancing the audience experience and engagement with new concepts and formats. But the revolution of machine learning extends far beyond features like hyper-efficient news chatbots. Other existing technologies may be impacted, too.

### AR and VR

AI can significantly enhance Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) experiences. For example, it can make both formats more immersive by improving the quality of 3-D environments and how users interact with them. AI can generate more realistic visuals, predict user behaviour, and personalise content in real time.

The *New York Times* has been a pioneer in using AR for journalism. An award-winning 2020 project titled [See How the World's Most Polluted Air Compares With Your City's](#) detected a user's geographic location and showed floating particles as a representation of air quality on the worst recorded day of the year there, then compared it to the Bay Area and New Delhi.<sup>13</sup>

Now imagine the same project with an injection of 2024-style generative AI: a personal AI-generated weatherman using natural language interaction to show, at the request of the user, air quality in your parents' town or at your child's school?

AR has always held particular promise for telling climate stories in a more immersive way, but the introduction of more sophisticated AI-driven content generation and personalization tools has the potential to take these experiences to the next level, enabling dynamically localised narratives and interactive simulations that respond to real-time data and user input.

### Personalisation

It is difficult to imagine a future where personalised journalism, including customised formats, does not continue to evolve and play a significant role. In this context, AI will also be crucial, enabling audiences to choose their preferred format for the topics they are interested in. For example, AI can analyse readers'

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<sup>13</sup> Popovich, N., & Migliozi, B. (2019) 'See How the World's Most Polluted Air Compares With Your City's', *The New York Times*, 2 December. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/02/climate/air-pollution-compare-ar-ul.html>

preferences and behaviour to deliver personalised news experiences, tailoring the format – whether text, video, audio, or interactive graphics – to individual tastes. An example of how powerful this approach can be is TikTok’s algorithm, which use machine learning and real-time adaptation to curate content precisely to individual user preferences based on a behaviour analysis of their past usage and interactions.<sup>14</sup>

### **Automated reporting**

AI already assists in generating news stories, and it has high potential for particularly for data-heavy reports – like companies’ ESG reports. AI can also provide real-time updates and alerts on breaking news.

Paradoxically, there is a human-centric opportunity here, too. As Axios’s VandeHei put it: “Fast forward five to 10 years from now and we’re living in this AI-dominated virtual world – who are the couple of players in the media space offering smart, sane content who are thriving?”<sup>15</sup>

The rise of AI and automation hopefully drives journalists to focus their energy on unearthing more complex enterprise reporting and investigative stories. Important ethical decisions and contextual understanding are difficult to automate, and AI also lacks nuanced understanding and editorial judgement that human journalists bring for storytelling.<sup>16</sup> Thus, journalists will be needed in the newsroom. The question is what they will be doing.

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<sup>14</sup> Apresapio Media. (2023). Cracking the Code: The TikTok Algorithm Explained. Available at: <https://www.apresapio.com/blog/cracking-the-code-the-tiktok-algorithm-explained>

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>16</sup> Trattner, C., Jannach, D., Motta, E. et al. (2022) Responsible media technology and AI: challenges and research directions. *AI Ethics* 2, 585-594

## Obstacles to innovation in newsrooms

“I’m a writer. My job is to write.” That’s what a top journalist and editor from a renowned British news outlet told me in a very short-lived interview about experimenting with new journalistic formats to engage readers. Another journalist, asked how he is innovating the way he reaches his audiences, said he primarily focuses on “straightforward news stories”, especially during busy periods.

These responses highlight two of the major obstacles to innovating the way we reach our audiences: legacy practises and time constraints.

These same elements serve as obstacles to innovation at Finans. When we established the Finans Impact vertical, the group was assigned an additional task: experiment with new formats. However, we quickly discovered that innovation is very difficult when it is treated as an add-on. Ingrained workflows and tight deadlines make it challenging to also focus on developing new formats. We tend to fall back on what we know best.

Tim Leslie, Climate Lead at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and former member of ABC’s Digital Storytelling Team, acknowledged that innovation in digital storytelling is time-consuming and needs to be prioritised to succeed. He recommended considering approach early in the process – at the ideation stage.

“If each time someone’s looking to do a story you start from scratch to find out the best way to do it, it winds up taking a lot of time,” he said. “In the Digital Storytelling Team – and I’ve adapted this for the climate team – we look for stories that struggle to be told well in traditional ways”.

If the story is a good story and can be told straightforwardly and effectively, there’s no need to think outside the box. But when stories involve complex data or don’t resonate well through traditional methods and formats – especially in climate reporting – it’s worth exploring creative approaches.

### **New skills?**

In [\*The Liability of Newness: Journalism, Innovation, and the Issue of Core Competencies\*](#) researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 25 digital journalists and found innovation largely come at the expense of the current workflow, particularly when the people in that workflow were missing the core competences required to implement the innovation in the way needed to succeed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> P. Ferrucci, G. Perreault (2021) *The Liability of Newness: Journalism, Innovation and the Issue of Core Competencies*. *Journalism Studies*, Volume 22, 2021 – issue 11

But the editors I spoke to for this project pushed back on that idea, saying it was internal politics and not skills that hindered innovation. The BBC's Rowlatt said: "We don't have any skills shortage. The commitment of the organisation to [innovating formats]... there was a feeling we were putting too much effort into it, because it wasn't generating such big audiences."

At the *Financial Times* Energy Editor Malcolm Moore also rejected the idea that a lack of skills in newsrooms limits innovation and creativity. Most journalists have already proven their ability to navigate numerous changes and learn new skills while trying to adapt to external factors such as social media algorithms or search engines.

"Journalists have in general proven to be highly adaptable. The fundamental journalistic skills – collect, verify, and transmitting information – do not necessarily need to change," Moore said.

Reuters' Kits Kimathi also highlights more structural reasons for limited innovation among reporters. At Reuters, she said, the challenge partly lies in fostering collaboration across such a sprawling organisation. "In this day and age I would like to think that loads of reporters already have the skills needed, and it's actually a matter of red tape," she said.

### **Down to business**

Skills and politics aside, who is managing to innovate well? The *Financial Times* is known for being proactive in exploring new ways to deliver the news and engage their audience. Within ESG they publish the Moral Money newsletter, and host the [Moral Money Summit](#), a two-day event with debate and insights on sustainability in business and finance.

They also consistently experimenting with interactive games and features, following the success of The Uber Game, which was played by more than half a million people. Other gamified news stories have include [The Climate Game](#) and [Dodging Trump's Tariffs](#). All three provide an immersive, engaging and enlightening experience for readers.

Before Moore became the Energy Editor, he was the Head of FT Edit, an app that offers eight in-depth articles daily. The app seeks to replace mindless scrolling on social media and news sites with more thought-provoking reading time.

According to Moore innovating new formats fundamentally relies on strategy. "What we need is a very clear business strategy," he said. "I think newsrooms are happy to try whatever they must do to transmit the information that they have. But for it to succeed, other parts of the business must have a good idea and good execution plan."

Kwong worked on developing formats both for the *Wall Street Journal* as a New Format Editor and for the *Financial Times*. When asked about the biggest obstacle he faced, he said it came down to the media industry's business models. Whether a media outlet relies on advertising or subscriptions, both rely on generating large volumes of page views, readership, or interactions. However, the quality of those encounters is not factored into the business model.

This incentivises the production of a high volume of content. It also encourages ensuring that each unit produced is at the lowest possible cost. "Everything is geared towards making something like a text article that is relatively low cost to produce. So, we're good at making them, which means we're good at making lots of them quickly," he said.

This structure is counterproductive for both the development of new journalistic formats and for reporting on complex issues, such as those related to ESG topics. It takes time to create and present engaging stories on complex topics.

The approach also does nothing to counter audience perception that they are drowning in news. Around four in ten people (39%) surveyed for the latest Digital News Report said they felt "worn out" by *the amount* of news, up from 28% in 2019.

Thus, one innovative solution for covering ESG topics more effectively could be to reduce the volume of news. It would allow for more time to develop and produce unique stories in engaging formats that many editors theorise will attract and retain subscribers. But there is no way to quickly test this theory without experimenting and looking for long-term patterns in the data.

Kwong regards our over-emphasis on clicks and conversions as a failure of measurement. We need to recalibrate our measures of success away from mass reach and towards deep engagement and lasting reader relationships.



## Redefining roles for engagement

ABC's Leslie views journalists as either "reporters" or "producers." Although he is an experienced reporter, he considers himself "spiritually a producer." While the reporters love to find stories, the producers are interested in how to tell the stories.

This perspective has been an advantage for him as the climate lead. He explained: "The conversation I always have with the reporter is: I know you get this is an important story. It's our job to make sure the audience walks away with that, too. Because if they don't understand it, it doesn't really matter how important it is, it's not going to have that impact".

There are still many stories that are best told straight forwardly, he said. However, when a story requires grasping something big and structural, it's crucial to extract the knowledge from the reporters and rope in the producers. Introducing pitch documents has helped here, he said, as it ensure the right people are roped into the process at an early stage.

It is not left to the ABC reporters to experiment with new formats on their own. Instead, it is a collaboration. ABC's Digital Storytelling Team includes journalists, developers, designers, and a few people with non-journalism backgrounds, for example a lawyer and an epidemiologist. Everyone is involved.

"I think it's important not thinking about technical or visual ways of storytelling as sitting outside – like ones does the journalism, and one does the technical bit, and the two never meet. That's where I think our team has had a lot of success," he said.

Another key strategy employed by the ABC's Digital Storytelling Team was to adopt a story-first approach – even when dealing with new formats. In other words: what is in service of telling the best journalistic story possible. One example of this was [How Climate Change Has Impacted Your Life](#).<sup>18</sup> Once a reader entered their age, the story changed to show how the temperature changed over their lifetime. "It's not a very complicated data set," he said, "but it takes out the abstracts of the topic and puts it into something much more relatable".

Not every newsroom benefits from the smooth cooperation between producers and reporters that Leslie described at ABC. At the BBC, interviews across departments revealed a missing link between exciting new formats and reporters' awareness of their existence.

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<sup>18</sup> T. Leslie, J. Bird, N. Hoad (2019) See how global warming has changed the world since your childhood, ABC. Retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-12-06/how-climate-change-has-impacted-your-life/11766018>

Tristan Ferne is executive producer at the BBC Research & Development team (R&D), where he develops and runs projects that use technology and design to prototype the future of media. He previously oversaw projects on new journalism formats and prototypes, among others a yearlong project about [what online news might look like if it wasn't a legacy of the 800 word-word newspaper article](#).

The team focused on creating story formats tailored for younger audiences, designing adaptable stories for women aged 28-45, and developing formats to enhance understanding of stories and issues for Gen Z. In a presentation on the project published on the BBC's website in November 2018, Tristan Ferne wrote: "We hope our findings inspire others to challenge the way we all present and report stories online".<sup>19</sup>

Six years on, and Ferne said that although the work they did inspired and informed some future products and systems in BBC News, it was never directly used by journalists and editors. "With lots and lots of our work we will do stuff which appears innovative, and we'll get to prototype and pilot stage, but implementing that for real is quite rare. This is a constant challenge," he said.

### **Innovation bridges**

Ferne said the challenge of bringing innovation from idea to implementation at the BBC stems from the organisation's size and structural complexity. In an organisation of that size, he said, everything must pass through multiple layers of approval. "It's all done in the same way, because it saves money," he said.

Exploring new avenues in journalism, including innovative formats, can't be left to journalists or engineers – they need a bridge. The BBC has [BBC News Labs](#), a team who use editorial, design, and technical skills to bridge the gap between the editorial teams and technology teams. They work closely with both sides aiming to drive innovation in news.

Kwong is a big fan of this approach, and argued that it frees a group to focus intensely and foster greater innovation in journalism. It also gives permission to experiment without risking the core product.

Not every experiment will be successfully integrated into the newsroom, but that is not necessarily a signal of waste. Kwong said innovation projects from large media organisations such as the BBC and the *Financial Times* often get picked up by other media outlets, thereby contributing to the broader development of journalism.

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<sup>19</sup> BBC. (2018). Beyond 800 Words: News Formats for Personalising and Understanding. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/rd/blog/2018-11-prototyping-news-explain-personalised-journalism>

For instance, the BBC’s innovation lab has pioneered several projects that have been adopted by other media houses, like [The Juicer](#) API and [StoryKit](#).<sup>20,21</sup> Similarly, the *Financial Times* has developed templates and storytelling formats that have found utility beyond its own newsroom, such as gamified content. The *New York Times* developed Scrollytelling in 2012, and in 2021 a third-party software tool (Scrolly) was developed to help other outlets imitate the style.

This cross-pollination of ideas ensures that innovations are not confined to the organisations that develop them but instead benefit the journalistic community.

Kwong argued that while there may be a gap between producers and reporters internally in large organisations, the ripple effects are often felt by others. “Tristan Ferne’s work has been hugely influential to things that happened at the *Financial Times*. And whenever I put out a guide or templates or similar tools, it was hard to get the *FT* to implement it. But I’ve heard from many others that have been able to use and implement it.”

Smaller news organisations, with more limited budgets and manpower, are more likely to directly implement and utilise the innovations they develop. In these settings, collaboration and shared resources are a vital lifeforce, enabling easier adoption.

Scroll’s Raghu said: “I think we need a little bit of a mindset shift in terms of how we look at producers of journalism. We must go into journalist creator mode, as opposed to limiting ourselves to roles like writer, video journalist, or photographer. These are just journalistic building blocks. What is a writer by the end of the day? You’re crafting with words, but you can use the same crafting to do another format, which is not necessarily an article.”

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/rdnewslabs/projects/juicer/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/rd/projects/object-based-media-toolkit>

## Conclusion

Earth faces a severe challenge in climate change, and quality ESG journalism is part of the solution. But ESG journalism, likewise, faces a severe challenge in winning audience attention. The answer may lie in reconsidering how our teams engage with innovative ideas and emerging technology to create new and exciting ways to tell these important stories.

We have seen that there are several obstacles to innovation in ESG: time, tried-and-tested methodologies, team structure and communication are among them. At some places, like the ABC in Australia, there seems to be a willingness to embrace a more creative process – this may be because their team lead was previously part of the ABC’s Digital Storytelling Team.

Leslie advocates for integrating digital storytelling into the early stages of idea development and emphasises the need for collaboration between reporters and producers to effectively tell complex stories, especially in climate reporting.

Skills are not considered a barrier to innovation, but internal politics, and structural issues often hinder progress. The *Financial Times* and Reuters, despite their successes, face similar obstacles. Large organisations like the BBC and *FT* have the resources for R&D, but widespread adoption seems to be a bugbear. Still, their innovations often influence other media outlets, demonstrating the broader impact of such efforts.

Looking forward, generative AI offers exciting opportunities: both in automation, enhanced immersive formats – like AR and VR – to explain complex ESG topics in an engaging way, and in personalisation. On the flipside, the rise of AI creates a niche for content that is carefully handcrafted by humans. The answer lies in balancing automation with the irreplaceable human touch, fostering collaboration, and prioritising innovation to engage audiences effectively.

By moving beyond traditional formats and embracing innovative storytelling techniques, we can perhaps make a meaningful impact in raising awareness and driving action within the realm of sustainability. Those who continue with business as usual will most likely not be part of the future of journalism.