



Roadmap for Navigating the Media Landscape: *Fall 2020 Edition*

How COVID-19 Stacks Up Against
New Mega-Trends—and How
Newsrooms are Responding



COMMUNICATIONS

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Introduction

From a global health crisis that has killed millions and halted economies seemingly overnight to sweeping protests calling for racial justice across the United States and beyond, 2020 will go down in history books as a year full of world-changing events.

And it's not over yet.

As this report is being written, wildfires burn up and down the West Coast and one of the most highly anticipated presidential elections in American history is just weeks away. Just when we think there may be a lull in the news, it seems another big story breaks.

In March, that big story was undoubtedly COVID-19. We were all enveloped in a 24-hour news cycle featuring daily briefings from state and White House officials, stories on emerging (and sometimes conflicting) safety protocols and seemingly endless analyses on topics spanning the economic outlook to election implications. At the time, many were left wondering if and how to best communicate, so we researched, analyzed and evaluated the media and influencer landscape to arm both our clients and staff with the information and data needed to shape their campaigns—the findings of which were published in [V2 Communications' Roadmap for Navigating the Media Landscape During COVID-19](#).

Six months later, COVID-19 coverage has evolved into conversations around the “new normal” in its many interpretations, re-opening plans (or lack thereof) for schools and offices alike, vaccine potential and, still but increasingly, election implications. But that is certainly not all that's on media agendas—as editorial decisions are being made in newsrooms, the news industry continues to be transformed and, unfortunately, often trimmed.

As news cycles move more quickly than ever, we continue to believe that the best communications strategies are informed by a keen understanding of the current media landscape and what journalists need to effectively do their jobs in the moment. So, once again, we went straight to the source(s)—the journalists and editors who are on the front lines of reporting the news—to understand the current priorities and pressures in today's newsrooms. And we've supplemented our analysis with our own research across media websites, data/analytics tools and our vendor partners.

Read on to learn our key findings. We welcome your feedback and ideas as we continue this research effort, and we are happy to answer any questions you might have.

Maura FitzGerald and Jean Serra
Founders, Partners

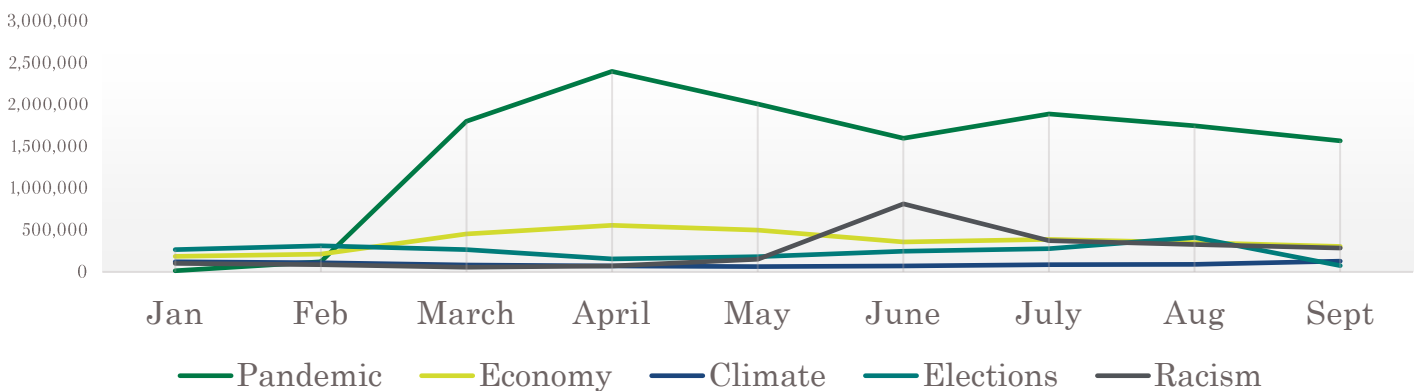
A woman with long blonde hair is sitting at a round table, looking down at a laptop. On the table is a white mug with a logo and a newspaper. The background is a brick wall with decorative diagonal lines in green, yellow, and white. The text "Understanding the Media Environment" is overlaid on the image.

Understanding the Media Environment

Mega Trends of 2020

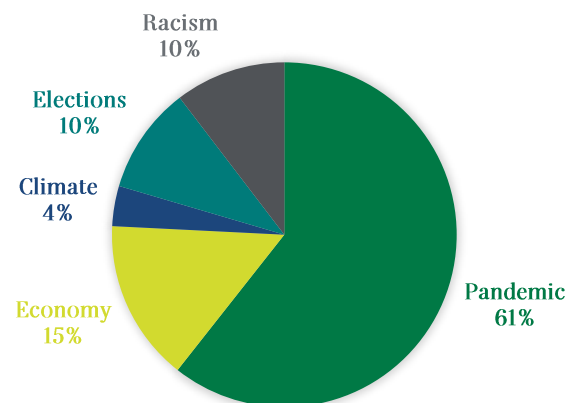
It's helpful to look at the media landscape at a macro level to understand what is happening in newsrooms around the country (remote as they may be). We analyzed the trending topics over time and in totality through the end of the third quarter. **The pandemic** is consistently the most written-about topic nationally, and while it may seem like forest fires and the climate would be rising issues this summer, these topics don't register significantly compared to **COVID-19, the U.S. elections, racism** or the **economy**.

MEDIA MEGA TRENDS
(January – September 2020)

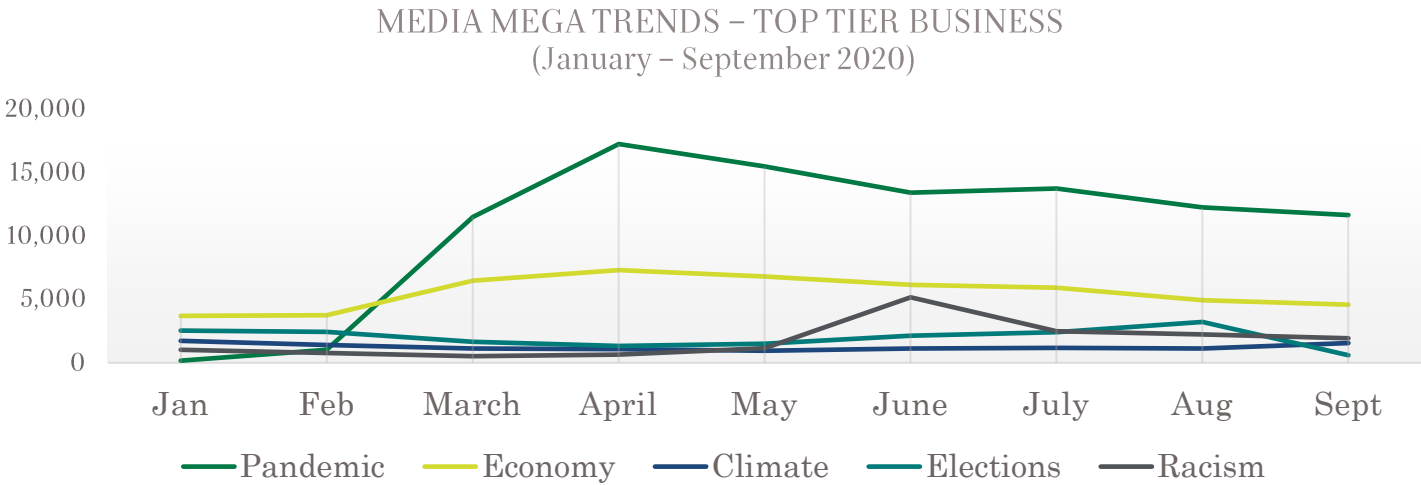


Naturally, the spike in coronavirus coverage started in March, and while the topic peaked in April, COVID-19 has remained consistently the most written-about theme. Surprisingly, coverage of elections has not increased dramatically in the U.S. even during the months leading up to the November presidential election. Coverage related to racism and racial inequality in the U.S. jumped precipitously in June upon the death of George Floyd. Coverage of racism has remained steadily higher than pre-June – on par with coverage of the economy and elections.

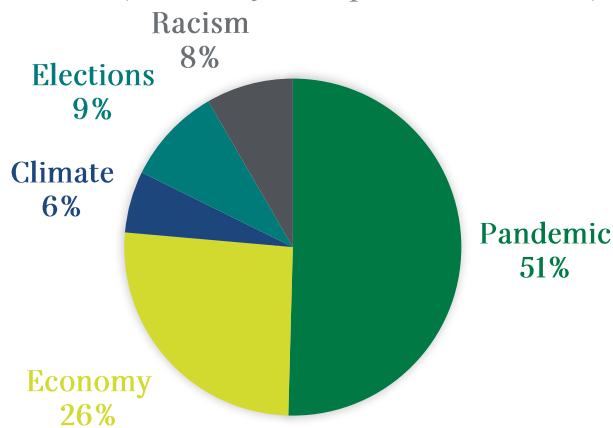
MEDIA MEGA TRENDS 2020
Share of Voice – January-September 2020



This analysis of all coverage in the U.S. is relatively consistent with coverage that appeared in top business press. For illustration purposes, we looked at how these topics were covered during the same period (Q1-Q3 2020), but specifically in **Bloomberg, Forbes, Fortune, The New York Times** and **The Wall Street Journal**. As perhaps expected, the **economy** is the second most covered topic behind the pandemic and notably a higher percentage than the general media overall.



MEDIA MEGA TRENDS 2020
Share of Voice – Top Business Press
(January – September 2020)



If that's not enough...

In a year of all-consuming news cycles around a pandemic and politics, it may be easy to forget some of the other headline-making news from 2020...

- Bushfires ravaged Australia
- Harry & Meghan stepped down from the Royal Family
- Kobe Bryant, his daughter and seven others are killed in helicopter crash
- Brexit actually happened
- President Trump was acquitted on articles of impeachment
- Harvey Weinstein was convicted and sentenced of assault and rape
- Murder hornets invaded the U.S.
- Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died at 87

The Business of Media

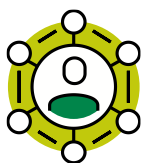
Beyond what stories are trending, it is important for us to understand the environment in which journalists are working—the environment behind the stories we ultimately see published. 2020 has not been an easy year for newsrooms or stations. And we're not just talking about being called "fake news."

Across the country, daily newspapers have been under economic siege—with lay-offs, furloughs and reduction in print editions hitting almost every market. Even the largest markets have been impacted: newsrooms like the LA Times, New York Post and multi-market publishers like Gannett (publisher of USA Today and 261 other papers in 46 states) have all cut or furloughed staff. Pay cuts for those who stay on are not uncommon.

Major radio broadcasters like Cumulus (424 stations in 87 markets) and the better-known brand iHeart Radio (153 markets) and even NPR felt the impact of the pandemic, reducing staff and shutting stations.

Major digital and print magazine publishers also made deep cuts this year—including business outlets like Quartz, Protocol and Fortune. Group publishers Condé Nast (Vogue, GQ, Vanity Fair) and Meredith (People, Entertainment Weekly) also made significant staff reductions.

This is all to say—there are fewer journalists to engage, and those who still have jobs have a tougher job to do. There's no shortage of news, but only limited resources to write about it. We need to understand this environment when we engage.



Over and Out! Media Moves

In the current media landscape, we should not be surprised that several high-profile journalists are striking out on their own to launch subscription newsletters. Perhaps they've been inspired by the success of [The Information](#), launched in 2013 by Jessica E. Lessin, who'd covered technology at The Wall Street Journal. Just a few examples of this growing trend:

- Polina Marinova, formerly of Fortune's Term Sheet, left to create [The Profile](#)
- Casey Newton, formerly of The Verge, launched [Platformer](#)
- Judd Legum, former EIC of ThinkProgress, is now writing about politics on [Popular Information](#)
- Climate reporter Emily Atkin is now publishing [Heated](#)

In his own words, Casey Newton, formerly of the Verge, describes his reason for the move: "One, journalism—and the democracy it supports—have suffered greatly in recent years from mass layoffs and under-experimentation in business models. By going independent, I hope to demonstrate that independent, reader-funded reporters can survive and even thrive, breathing new life into a profession that is bleeding out in no small part due to the platforms I cover."

A grayscale photograph of a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a patterned sweater, looking down at a computer. In the top right corner, there is a decorative graphic consisting of a grid of diagonal lines in green, yellow, and white. The text "Digging Deeper: The Media Landscape" is overlaid in the center in a white serif font, with a thin yellow underline beneath the second line.

Digging Deeper: The Media Landscape

To complement our research looking back on the first three quarters of the year and the trending topics over time, we also sought to understand the current landscape today and what the future may hold (as far as anyone can predict in such a year). To do this, we analyzed the media sources that matter most to our clients and spoke directly to the journalists and editors we work with regularly.

Business Press

Coverage of the coronavirus continues to dominate business press headlines, though the angle of those stories has shifted. What was previously a narrative focused on the immediate impact of the pandemic on individuals, businesses, schools, etc., is now dedicated to the long-term impact of the pandemic—particularly on the economy. Stories are often centered on first-hand accounts, which range from individuals on the frontlines and families who have been impacted, to small business owners and biotech firms working to fast-track a vaccine. Simultaneously, the election coverage continues to pick up speed—and, in many cases, is combined with COVID-19 coverage as reporters analyze the economic impacts of the pandemic and the plans from both parties to combat that. With new stories cropping up daily on both topics, reporters in business press newsrooms are strapped for time and resources, with many pitching in to cover topics that aren't at all related to their normal beats.



"I think **reporters are generally open to hearing opinions from others about what's important to cover.** I think so long as COVID is still affecting business widely and their bottom lines, it will continue to matter."

"I think we are **obviously covering COVID, but more from a long-term ramification standpoint than a day-to-day response.** Obviously if a company is going to pivot to entirely remote permanently, we would cover that. But other than that, I think it's mostly like layoffs or changes in operations to address the crisis."

"**Your success is not a story...**unless your story ties into some larger cultural trend, or holds some type of important wider significance, I am not interested in covering it. And frankly, it's not newsworthy."

"We're short staffed and I **keep having to pick up extra stories.**"

Broadcast

Broadcast is similarly dominated by COVID-19 and the election, being largely driven by breaking news or stories pertaining to both topics. Producers are still open to company profiles—hearing directly from C-Suite executives on how the pandemic has impacted their businesses (whether positive or negative), the strategies they’ve put into place and the advice they would offer other companies.



“We are generally **doing C-Suite interviews if there is some hook related to the pandemic or return to work** issues. Also, we tend to prefer the CEOs if they are available.”

“Every segment is built around really strong characters. **We need a good character and speaker, combined with a great picture or visual—**that’s where our happy place lies.”

Tech Press

For the most part, tech media continue to maintain a “business as usual” approach to reporting—though are certainly still referencing COVID-19 or pursuing stories with a COVID tie-in. As expected, these stories largely focus on the tech being used to try to stop the spread of the virus—contact-tracing apps, wearable devices, etc.—as well as how the pandemic has impacted IT departments across organizations. Reporters are typically still receptive to interesting product news or use cases, and are very interested in use cases that have a COVID-19 tie. The election has also started to influence reporters, particularly those focused on deep fakes or cybersecurity.



“I’ve **turned away from COVID-led stories**. I will discuss a topic like the cloud but only mention its relevance to COVID in the body of the article (not a title/attention grabber anymore).”

“As COVID continues to impact business and dictate CIO priorities, we’ll continue to cover it.”

“I’m **getting more pitches than ever** and haven’t been able to tell all the stories I want to.”

Vertical

At the start of the pandemic in March, it was clear the impact was going to be felt throughout industries, but the extent to each was still undetermined. Now, six months in, nearly every industry has been completely upended. While some vertical trades and beat reporters are operating business-as-usual, others are struggling to maintain normal coverage with the continued ripple effects of the pandemic. To analyze this, V2 evaluated five core industries:.

- **Supply Chain**

With numerous business closures and the influx in shipments from consumers, supply chains have become more complex over the last few months. Reporters are analyzing this shift, as well as focusing on how suppliers are preparing for the delivery of a COVID-19 vaccine—and what that will look like logistically. They're less interested in thought leadership pitches, and more interested in shorter, news-oriented commentary—particularly supply chain/logistics beat reporters at Bloomberg and Washington Post.



“To us, **breaking news remains the same**. We don't focus strictly on COVID-19 material; we still abide by the topics we previously planned to cover in 2020. COVID-19 is just one element to that.”

- **Manufacturing**

With complex supply chains come complicated manufacturing cycles. Reporters are most interested in first-hand stories from manufacturers about their experiences during the pandemic—particularly any that shifted to produce PPE, leveraged technology to digitize shop floors or are keenly focused on digital transformation—though they need to have real results to catch their eyes. The impact of global trade regulation and imports and exports continues to be focus as well.



“The **story idea needs to emphasize the process, not the product**. We do cover specific products in our technology highlight sections, but general features remain brand-neutral.”

“I am **months behind planned stories**. Things keep getting pushed off for COVID-specific coverage.”

- **Health Care**

Unsurprisingly, healthcare reporters are swamped with COVID-19 coverage. Their focus has largely been unchanged over the last few months, covering how the virus is spreading, stories from the front lines and the long-term impact this is having on healthcare providers. News-oriented pitches and customer stories—particularly ones with compelling data—are critical to breaking through in this noisy vertical.



“I select stories based on the kinds of technologies being used, ones that would be of most help to healthcare provider organizations, especially telehealth during the pandemic, and on what kinds of **results** can be shown from using a technology. In other words, how well did it help.”

“We're vendor-neutral so I try to stay away from vendor news and **focus on the care providers using the technology.**”

- **Marketing & Ad Tech**

At the business press level, marketing and ad tech coverage is largely focused on how current events are impacting consumer habits and the trickledown effect that has on brands—both in terms of where they make media buys and how they approach diversity and inclusion. At the trade level, these topics are still important, though they're still interested in broader marketing best practices and tips for marketers that might not necessarily relate to current hot topic issues.



“We **rarely cover news** per se as our focus is on delivering **content that can be a value add** for senior marketers and decision makers.”

- **Education**

It's back to school season—but that looks very different than it has in years past. Every education trade and beat reporter is focused on the return to school and the different approaches being taken across regions—from fully online, to hybrid zoom and in-person models—with a particular emphasis on colleges that are experiencing an uptick in COVID-19 cases. These outlets are interested in direct experiences—whether that's individual teachers or the challenges experienced by families.



“**It is a problem that there's so much news...** The [higher education] value conversation is not going away when COVID does...it was here before and now it's been exacerbated.”



Identifying Opportunities: New Sections & Segments



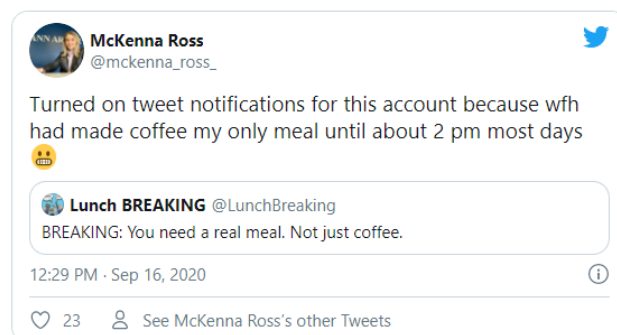
With news cycles moving at rapid paces and reporters taking on more stories—often outside of their core beats—to keep up, we’ve seen mainstream outlets create new sections, segments and newsletters to cover current events and trending topics. Noteworthy examples include:

- **New York Times, Daily Distortions** – Debunking and contextualizing misinformation that has gone viral on social media
- **Fortune, How to Reopen** – How a world reeling from the novel coronavirus pandemic can get back to business, based on real people and their real stories
- **Bloomberg, Prognosis Daily** – A daily podcast that explains the latest news, data and analysis for living in the time of COVID-19 in around ten minutes, based on reporting from more than 120 bureaus around the world.
- **The Forbes Next 1000** – A first-of-its-kind initiative proving American entrepreneurship remains resilient, vibrant and ever-changing by spotlighting bold and inspiring entrepreneurs—the ambitious sole proprietors, self-funded shops and pre-revenue startups who are redefining what it means to build and run a business today, especially in the “new normal.”
- **NPR, How I Built Resilience** – A spin on the well-known “How I Built This” podcast, this series—hosted by Guy Raz—features online conversations with founders and entrepreneurs about how they’re navigating these turbulent times.
- **CNN, Work Transformed** – How we work may be forever changed. As millions learn to work from home, so many others are suddenly out of work. This newsletter offers tips and tactics as we navigate this new normal.



How Busy are Journalists These Days, Really?

A satirical (or not?) Twitter account [@LunchBreaking](#) was created by Florida-based multimedia journalist Emily Bloch reminding journalists to take lunch. The account’s 375+ followers represent editors and reporters from NBC News, Quartz, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times and Associated Press, among others.





What's Next



V2's Guide to Operating Through 2020 and Beyond

Measure twice (or more), cut once...a sound strategy is more important than ever as we work our way through Q4 and planning for 2021. Taking in all we know about today's media environment, we offer recommendations for making the most of turbulent times:

- **News isn't news, unless it's really news. (Really.)**

Do you remember the days where you could “manufacture” news? Those days are over. In fact, we think the concept of an “embargo” has been waning and COVID-19 might have finally killed the concept. The filters journalists apply are consistent from years past, but the funnel is tighter when they consider these factors:

- Is this information valuable to my readers? Is it important to the market, or just to the company pitching it?
- Is it timely? Do I need to cover this today, this week or on this embargo date? Or can I wait to cover the story in my own time (if at all)?

On the topic of news timing, we have found that the date and day of the week a press release is issued has very little bearing unless the news is truly breaking and meaningful. And given the assessment of timeliness, if you have secured interest in the story, give journalists time to pitch their editors and work the stories into their schedule. Don't be impatient.

- **Frame your news and story angles in the context of broader trends.**

News or story angles without broader market implications won't get much attention from busy journalists consumed with the mega trends of 2020. While it's always been best practice to connect a product/company to broader trends, it's now nearly impossible to gain interest in a conversation without it. If you're struggling to find the right angle, consider:

- Commissioning a Survey: Data is very helpful to journalists, so if you're struggling to connect to bigger trends directly, a targeted survey will give you the opportunity to provide valuable insights to the media, as well as customers and prospects.
- Engaging in a Storyline Workshop: V2 has a well-perfected half-day workshop designed to dig into the stories that matter most to media and our clients' target markets. Consider booking your V2 team for the extra focus and lift to your storytelling.

- **Prepare your full storytelling package.**

To prove the relevance of your story, it's more important than ever to have all the pieces of your story teed up. Besides having a unique or unexpected angle, make sure you have third-party sources to speak to the market needs, customers to illustrate use cases and even partners to validate the market opportunity. Consider what else you might be able to offer to make the story more compelling, including new research or proprietary data, behind the scenes or exclusive access (but forget the “embargo” strategy, per recommendation #1).

- **Take control of your storytelling.**

Now is a great time to invest in your own communication channels. Take this time to revamp the use of existing social channels. Why not try out new features like LinkedIn Live to stream content or increase exposure for your expert voices through LinkedIn publishing? If you've ever considered a podcast, this is a great way to engage new audiences and take advantage of Zoom fatigue. Not sure where to start? Your V2 team can help.



Don't Skip this Step! Target the right journalists.

While tactical, it's important to update your media lists regularly. We've seen assignments change quite a bit; even longstanding beat reporters have been pulled in to cover topics that need more support, like COVID-19. Never pitch a reporter unless you've read their recent work. It's worth your time (and theirs).

Research Methodology

V2 conducted research between September 15 and October 9, 2020. This included qualitative audit of media websites and quantitative analysis using tools such as Muck Rack. We also directly contacted journalists we work most closely with to get their direct perspective. This report represents perspective from staff at outlets such as:

Forbes

**WALL STREET
JOURNAL**

**BUSINESS
INSIDER**

Bloomberg



WIRED



COMMUNICATIONS

2



V2 Communications is the public relations and digital communications firm for disruptive global brands, redefining what it means to be a strategic communications partner. The agency helps brands navigate the complexities that define communications today to drive business success and growth. V2's skilled professionals combine a business mindset and creative thinking to provide the strategic counsel, campaign ideas and results that move businesses forward.

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