

# How Media Companies Can Meet Their Climate Commitments - And How Readers Can Help



*Laura Lee Cascada -Photo:  
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*02-01-2024 ~ A few simple strategies for recipe curation can help newsgroups achieve their own climate goals.*

The global shift toward plant-forward diets, particularly in wealthy countries, is consistently [recognized](#) as one of the most effective ways to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions.

Given the significant influence media wields in shaping cultural norms, news outlets have a unique opportunity to promote plant-based eating, mainly through the recipes they offer their audiences. Through several simple behavioral nudges, news outlets can guide their readers toward healthier, climate-friendly eating—while aligning their recipe sections with their purported values around responsible climate reporting.

## *Environmental and Public Health Dangers of Factory Farming*

Industrial animal agriculture is an enormous driver of planetary harm. According to a June 2018 article published in the journal [Science](#), meat, aquaculture, dairy, and eggs contribute about 56 to 58 percent of food's greenhouse gas emissions,

yet they only provide 18 percent of our calories. Meat and dairy production is also a [leading cause](#) of biodiversity loss, freshwater use, chemical pollution, and resource shortages.

While [up to 8,000](#) gallons of water are needed to produce just a pound of beef, a pound of tofu only requires about 300 gallons, according to an article in UCLA Sustainability. “[W]ithout meat and dairy consumption, global farmland use could be reduced by more than 75 percent—an area equivalent to the U.S., China, European Union, and Australia combined—and still feed the world,” [states](#) an article in the Guardian.

Because of the crowded, filthy conditions inherent to factory farms, animal agriculture further contributes to a range of public health risks of particular concern in the post-pandemic world. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, poultry and egg production is [associated](#) with foodborne pathogens such as salmonella and campylobacter, and these farms are [incubators](#) of many potentially dangerous influenza viruses.

Given these dangers, an article in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine [points out](#) that besides doing away with the cruel confinement practices associated with animal agriculture, there is a need “to research, develop, and invest in innovative plant-based and cultivated meat technologies to move away from raising billions of feathered and curly-tailed test tubes for viruses with pandemic potential to mutate within.”

Farmed animals are also the [largest source](#) of antibiotic usage in the U.S. at about [73 percent](#)—based on figures provided by the Natural Resources Defense Council in December 2022—leading to the rise of antibiotic-resistant superbugs. The nonprofit Farm Forward revealed in August 2022 that even meat labeled as antibiotic-free [may still contain](#) these drugs.

### *Mainstream Media’s Role in Creating a Climate-Friendly Food System*

Many large news organizations have made public their own internal goals of helping the climate. The New York Times, for example, [says](#) that the newspaper “recognize[s] the effects of climate change, and we are taking action to reduce our own impact. We are committed to reducing our carbon footprint and identifying opportunities to improve the sustainability of our business operations.”

In 2021, the Times debuted “[The Veggie](#)” newsletter and dedicated more space in

their digital cooking section for vegetarian and vegan recipes, reviews, and tips. “The call for vegan and vegetarian foods is growing louder every day, and as the volume increases, the food world is responding,” [wrote](#) Maxwell Rabb in an article on the Beet about the Times initiative.

Internally and externally, media groups play an outsized role in shaping both public sentiment and cultural norms. Fact-based coverage of climate change has [gradually improved](#) in recent years, with many outlets now espousing a commitment to scientifically reporting on the issue. For example, several top publications now have climate-dedicated verticals, while the Guardian [introduced](#) new guidelines in 2019 for language and images used in climate stories to reflect the issue’s urgency. But for most news outlets, a glaring blind spot around climate remains—in their food sections.

A [2023 Faunalytics and Sentient Media](#) report on the number of times animal agriculture was mentioned by climate media found that only 7 percent of the 1,000 climate articles surveyed mentioned animal agriculture. Six times as many articles mentioned transportation.

Given that animal agriculture’s [emissions rival](#) those of the entire transportation sector, the media’s heavy emphasis on electric vehicles and petrol has obscured our food system’s outsized role in the climate crisis.

Considering the lack of journalistic attention given to industrial animal agriculture, it is unsurprising that most news outlets have yet to align their recipe sections with their commitment to responsible climate coverage. Yet these publications have a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to profoundly shape cultural norms by promoting climate-friendly, plant-based foods.

One of the few recipe hubs bold enough to make the link explicit is Condé Nast-owned Epicurious, which in 2021 “left beef behind.” Citing ruminants’ inefficiency and rising beef consumption in the U.S., [Epicurious’s new policy](#) was keenly introduced at rollout as “not anti-beef but rather pro-planet.” Beef does not feature in any Epicurious-originating recipes, articles, or newsletters after April 2021—though, counterproductively, the site still cross-posts beefy recipes from sister brand Bon Appetit.

Besides Epicurious, most recipe sites have been silent on this topic.

## *Investigating Mainstream Media's Recipe Curation*

I work at the [Better Food Foundation](#) (BFF), serving as the senior director of campaigns. We wanted to determine whether mainstream media outlets had begun aligning their recipe curation with the climate-conscious values they espouse. So, with support from [Sentient Media](#), we worked with a data scientist to [analyze the recipe sections](#) of the top four UK-based—BBC, the Guardian, the Independent, and ITV—and top four U.S.-based—Associated Press, New York Times, Washington Post, and Yahoo News—media outlets with a track record for responsible climate reporting (reporting that adheres to the scientific consensus) in 2023.

Among these eight outlets, we found that five predominantly feature meat-based recipes. Only the Washington Post, the Guardian, and Yahoo News had less than half of their recipes categorized as “omnivorous.”

Notably, the Washington Post and the Guardian both [expressed](#) their intent to curate climate-friendly food content, indicating some level of awareness about their role in addressing the climate-diet link not only through reporting but also through modeling sustainable behavior.

We offered every outlet a chance to respond to our findings, and one significant reply came from Joe Yonan of the Washington Post, who [explained](#), “We are always looking for ways to help our readers lead better lives, according to their own definition, and recipes play a large role in that... [M]ore and more readers are looking for help making climate-friendly decisions about all aspects of their lives, food included, and we want to respond to that.”

## *Looking Ahead*

So, where do we go from here? For most mainstream news outlets, there is an untapped opportunity to curate more plant-forward recipe sections. Our [report](#) about the findings mentioned above and an [accompanying webinar](#) offer five scientifically proven strategies that use behavioral “nudges” to guide readers toward more climate-friendly meals.

These tips, part of a concept we call [DefaultVeg](#), make plant-based foods the primary or default option without taking away the choice to select meat or dairy. A [2022 study](#) conducted by Food for Climate League in collaboration with BFF, Greener by Default, and researchers at Boston College on three Sodexo campuses

found that when implemented consistently, this strategy increased the take rate of plant-based meals from 30.8 percent to 81.5 percent—significantly cutting food’s environmental footprint.

### *Suggestions to News Organizations*

We suggest the following [changes](#) in the recipe sections of news outlets:

Maintain a 2-to-1 ratio of plant-based to animal-based recipes. For every omnivorous entree, there should be two vegan recipes, or at the very least, one vegetarian and one vegan recipe.

Present plant-based options first, by default. Feature climate-friendly options prominently within search results and recipe collections by listing them first.

Designate editors’ picks or seasonal recommendations as plant-based by default. When creating features like a summer BBQ showcase or Thanksgiving dishes emphasize plant-based grilling options or vegan dishes like roasted squash and vegan mashed potatoes.

Substitute animal-based ingredients with plant-based alternatives in popular recipes. Many recipes can easily become vegan by swapping out specific ingredients without sacrificing the flavor or quality of the dish. For instance, use vegan mayo instead of egg-based mayo in potato salad—taste testers won’t notice the difference.

Include a climate score for each recipe based on ingredient emissions intensity. Present climate-friendly options as a priority, following a successful approach demonstrated in online simulations and randomized clinical trials.

Shifting toward plant-based eating is among the most [powerful changes](#) we as individuals can make to benefit the planet. Media, which has a major impact on popular culture and behavior, can help facilitate this shift on an enormous scale by presenting plant-based foods as the norm rather than the exception. Making the simple changes mentioned above to their recipe sections will also help media outlets better adhere to their own stated climate reporting values—and maintain their status as trusted news sources with an audience that’s [increasingly hungry](#) for climate-friendly food.

And readers have a role to play, too. They can help by writing letters to editors of

newspapers and magazines asking them to make their recipe sections more climate-friendly and increase their coverage of plant-based eating.

*By Laura Lee Cascada*

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