

POWERING UP OR SWITCHING OFF?

What the shifting media narrative means for the energy sector



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INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, energy, sustainability and decarbonisation issues dominated media headlines.

Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine had driven up the wholesale cost of energy, impacting household bills and leading to unprecedented financial support from the then government. Media coverage reflected the rise in bills and promoted the value of 'clean' products like heat pumps, solar panels and electric vehicles – as well as the wider energy security implications of the conflict.

But as economic pressures intensified, the media narrative around the ongoing cost-of-living crisis has mirrored the public – and political – backlash around perceived high costs of a sustainable future. The recent General Election campaign further politicised the energy debate - with net zero plans consistently making headlines.

At the same time, increased scrutiny of the road to decarbonisation has led to a stronger understanding of the broader energy ecosystem in newsrooms, with 'technical' issues like grid capacity, market reform and supporting green technologies moving from the trade press to mainstream debate.

SO WHAT?

So what does this shifting media focus mean for businesses operating in the energy, decarbonisation and clean technology space? If media coverage reflects and dictates what people think, how do businesses protect reputation, engage decision makers, and drive sales when there is increased media scrutiny, but less airtime to get your position across?

We have analysed today's energy media landscape to identify the most pressing challenges and opportunities – and how businesses can cut through.

INSIGHTS

#1 MEDIA FOCUS ON ENERGY IS FALLING, BUT STILL REMAINS HIGH

The invasion of Ukraine and subsequent spike in energy bills led to a significant increase in column inches on energy and associated issues.

Throughout 2022, there were over five million mentions of energy issues across UK mainstream news and broadcast outlets – an average of 13.7k a day. By 2023, energy media coverage dropped to 3.16m before starting to climb slightly in the first half of 2024 (although at lower levels than previous years).

This downward trend is likely due to an increased focus on other domestic and international news stories, as well as a shift in consumer and business priorities through the cost-of-living crisis. Of note, there's been an increase in reporting linked to the challenges of reaching net zero, and the green 'skills gap' has been mentioned in nearly 20% of reporting on renewables this year.

**1.26 MILLION
MENTIONS –
AN AVERAGE
OF 6.96K A DAY**

(Jan – June 2023)

**1.41 MILLION
MENTIONS –
AN AVERAGE
OF 7.77K A DAY**

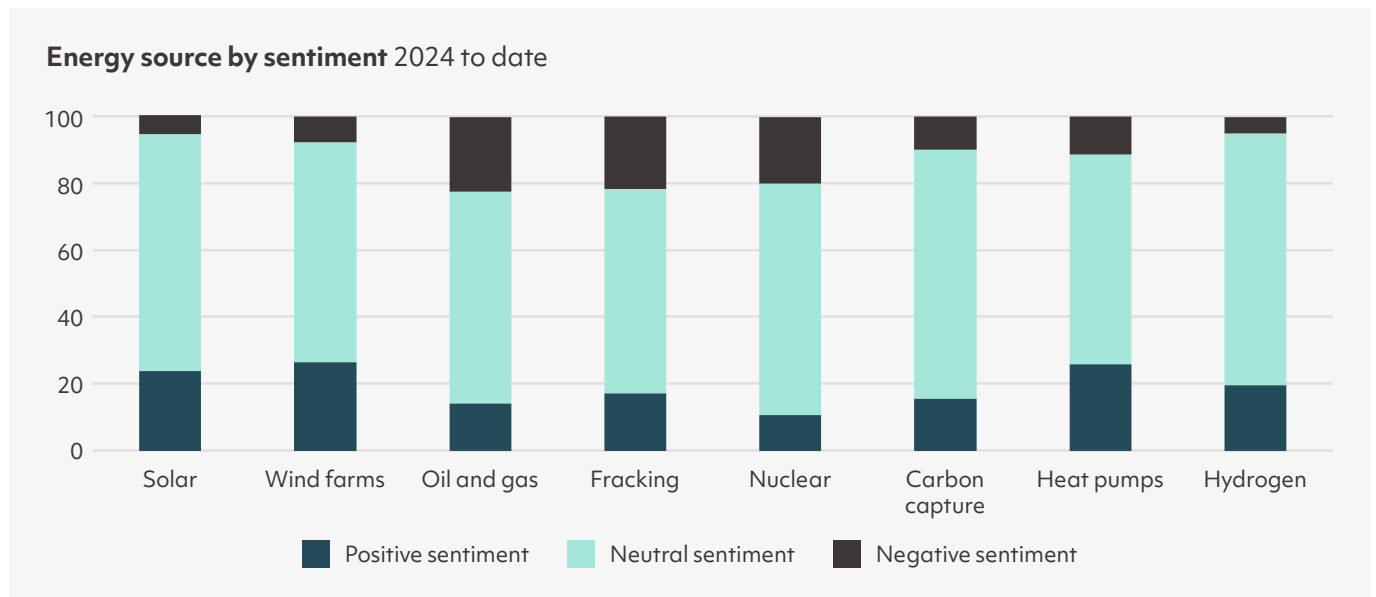
(Jan-June 2024)

#2 A CLEAR DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGIES AND ENERGY SOURCES

Media tone and sentiment vary dramatically when talking about different technologies and power sources, reflective of the wider debate around achieving net zero. Overall, the word 'renewable' generates largely positive or neutral coverage (23.3% positive, 69.3% neutral so far in 2024), and specific renewable technologies like solar and wind farms track well.

However, energy sources such as oil and gas and fracking generate slightly more negative coverage, while carbon capture divides opinion with a 5% difference in positive and negative sentiment (15.5% positive and 9.8% negative).

Interestingly, discourse is significantly more polarised on social media, with 33.6% negative and 28.3% positive mentions of renewable energy on X (formerly Twitter) in 2024.



#3 THERE IS PRESSURE ON THE NEW GOVERNMENT TO DELIVER

The Labour Party's decision to drop its pledge to invest £28bn in green energy was widely criticised in the media, with commentators branding it "short-sighted" (Friends of the Earth) and a "distraction" (Institute for Government).

In a move to manage reputational fallout, the row-back was blamed on the economic climate caused by a Conservative Government, with the term 'fiscal rules' appearing in approximately a third (562 out of 1.59k) associated mentions.

The Guardian

'KEIR STARMER TAKE NOTE': UK'S GREEN TRANSITION MUST START NOW, SAY EXPERTS

Labour's victory, alongside strong Green performance, gives next PM mandate to act boldly on net zero, say campaigners

The Telegraph

MILIBAND OVERRULES OFFICIALS WITH IMMEDIATE BAN ON NEW NORTH SEA OIL

Energy Secretary faces dispute with oil companies as he seeks to block exploration

With Labour now in Government, there will be increased media scrutiny of how they are delivering against their ambitions – with right wing media already questioning the feasibility of their plans, and left-wing press tracking progress against stated ambitions.

#4 LOCAL ISSUES CONTINUE TO DRIVE NATIONAL COVERAGE

Grassroots activism has long played a role in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions, with stories broken by local press often spiralling into national stories. A recent example is the local campaign against new electricity pylons in East Anglia leading to a steady drumbeat of regional media coverage (Eastern Daily Press, local BBC and ITV news), before being elevated into a national story, with Sky and Reuters covering opposition to the pylons as an example of the wider net zero debate.

THERE HAVE BEEN 1,680 MENTIONS OF LOCAL OPPOSITION TO NEW PYLONS IN 2024 SO FAR.

March 2023

EAST ANGLIAN
DAILY TIMES

FARMERS AGAINST NG NORWICH TO TILBURY PYLON PROJECT

Eastern Daily Press

CALL FOR EAST ANGLIAN PYLON CONSULTATION TO STOP FOR REVIEW

March 2024

sky news

WHY ELECTRICITY PYLONS IN ESSEX ARE THE FRONT LINE IN THE BATTLE TO HIT NET ZERO

itv NEWS

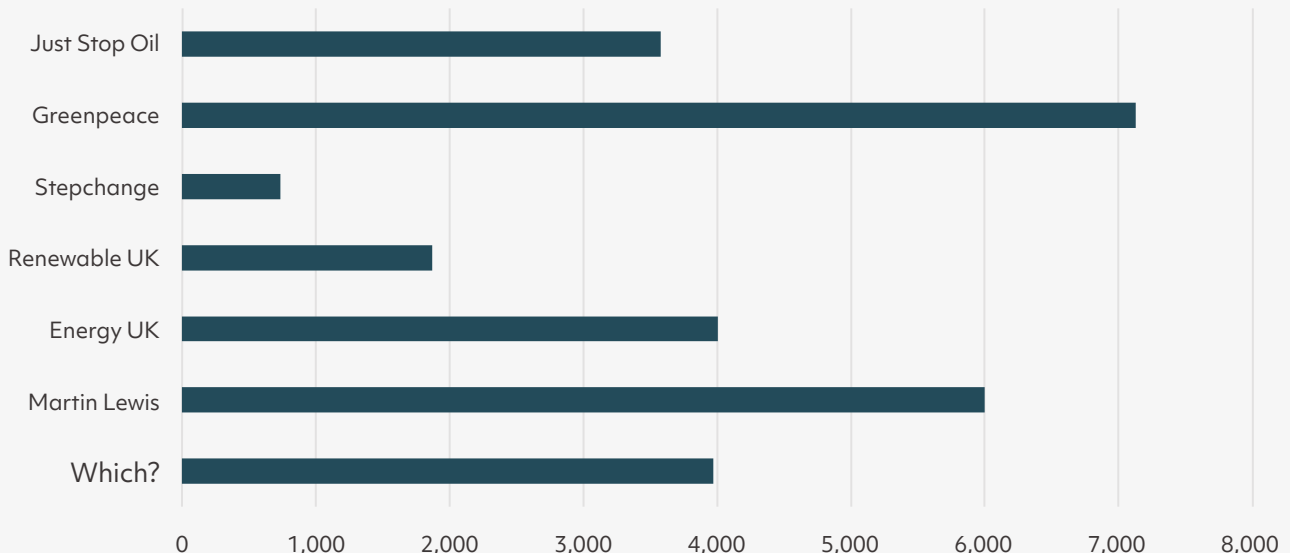
FROM SIZEWELL C TO LIONLINK: THE IMPACT OF AN ENERGY REVOLUTION IN EAST ANGLIA

#5 THE RISE OF THE INFLUENCER

As the cost-of-living crisis put energy under the spotlight, sector trade press has gone from strength to strength – reporting on the technical and policy drivers behind national headlines. Utility Week, for example, has been closely following the intricacies of the grid connection issue – and need for reform – in a way that the national press has only touched on.

At the same time, new influential voices have emerged in national conversations, with regular input and challenge from consumer champions, environmental activists and industry lobby groups shaping the energy debate.

Number of energy mentions 2024 to date



“FOR ME B2B MEDIA HAS ALWAYS SERVED THREE PURPOSES: TO INFORM; TO ENTERTAIN; AND TO HOLD TO ACCOUNT. HOWEVER, WITH UTILITIES BECOMING MORE PROMINENT IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA AND POLITICIANS OFTEN TAKING AIM AT ENERGY AND WATER COMPANIES, OUR ROLE AT UTILITY WEEK IS ALSO TO PROVIDE BALANCE AND TO GIVE THE INDUSTRY A VOICE, ALL WHILE ENSURING WE RETAIN OUR EDITORIAL INTEGRITY. IT’S A TRICKY LINE TO WALK WITH SO MANY DIVISIVE ISSUES WITHIN THE SECTOR, BUT ONE OUR EDITORIAL TEAM MANAGES TO NAVIGATE ON A DAY-TO-DAY BASIS.”

Rob Horgan, News Editor, Utility Week

KEY TAKEAWAYS

How businesses can cut through in a shifting media landscape:

- 1. Show contribution to UK economy and energy transition** – are you contributing to the green skills agenda? Or is your technology driving efficiencies and productivity? Make sure this comes through in messaging.
- 2. React quickly to local issues** – what might appear a local issue can quickly spiral in a politicised environment, so map emerging risks and put crisis plans in place.
- 3. Don’t ignore trade and regional press** – ensure your media strategy captures the most influential publications for your business focus and region.
- 4. Align media messages with policy objectives** – in a complex regulatory environment, aligning media engagement with corporate affairs objectives will lead to commercial success.
- 5. Consider the consumer impact** – there remains high media and political interest in the impact of energy policy on households, so positioning comms through a consumer lens will help cut through.

WA Comms works closely with leading generators, global power management companies, clean tech start-ups and EV disruptors to secure impactful media coverage that supports commercial outcomes.

If you would like to discuss how we can help you, please contact:

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