



Turning a corner: Is sustainability
being taken in a new direction?
A quarterly review of Environmental,
Social and Governance issues in the media

2025

lutherpendragon

Executive Summary

Are thought leaders withdrawing from the topic of sustainability? Our latest report finds that media coverage of thought leadership on environmental, social and governance issues fell in the last quarter of 2024. This continues a trend of declining coverage for thought leadership focused on sustainability issues.

Luther's previous report, *Electrifying Debates*, found that business enthusiasm for sustainability was fading in some places, with concerns about the politicisation of the agenda making organisations more reticent to promote their insights. This trend has likely been compounded by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the worldwide momentum behind right-leaning parties that deprioritise or oppose the agenda.

Yet this does not explain the full picture. Many organisations, having dedicated time and resource over a significant period of time, remain enthusiastic about the sustainability agenda and want to continue to lead the debate. Where others withdraw it will create greater space for those pursuing the agenda with conviction. While coverage fell overall, and coverage of environmental thought leadership reduced, social and governance coverage was higher this quarter. It looks likely that some thought leaders are broadening their discussion, but they still want to engage.

It may also be the case that the phraseology of sustainability is shifting as it becomes more embedded in organisations' practices. Standardised reporting requirements, such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) are pushing firms towards more structured disclosures. The compliance process may nudge them to move away from more traditionally understood terms, and towards specific reporting categories.

The shift doesn't necessarily indicate a decline, but rather a maturing of these concepts within corporate strategies. The recent 'Omnibus Bill' proposed by the European Commission will focus reporting requirements on a smaller group of large companies, but we can expect to see this trend continue as CSRD is implemented.

Rapid changes in the coverage of subcategories also show that thought leaders are focusing on specific aspects of sustainability, and often doing so with considerable success. So how can organisations pick their moment and add fresh impetus?

Environmental

Coverage of environmental focused thought leadership fell markedly from the previous quarter, emphasising it as a topic where organisations have become more cautious. Many seem to be taking a 'wait and see' approach for now and, amid a fluid political backdrop, allowing the dust to settle before deciding how and if to reengage.

Previous reports have highlighted the annual COP climate change conferences as a significant opportunity for thought leaders, but COP29 in Azerbaijan proved to be less of a focal point than previous editions. Controversies over the hosts before the conference, and an underwhelming set of resolutions at the end, meant that the media were less likely to use it as a hook for coverage of environmental thought leadership.

Nonetheless, there were topics within the environmental agenda that achieved more coverage than in the previous quarter. This included stories on carbon footprint, with thought leaders effectively tapping into public interest in social media, for example by exploring TikTok's environmental impact.

Social

Thought leadership on social issues rose in the last quarter of 2024, largely driven by an increase in coverage for insights on inclusion, which rose by over

two-thirds. A number of successful reports explored well-known issues in new ways. For example, a survey on age discrimination focused on how it impacts young people.

Reports on the effects of irresponsible sourcing and inappropriate breaches of data security highlight that these remain controversial areas that attract interest.

Global economic disruption will have significant impacts on supply chains, while the growth of AI has generated still-to-be-resolved problems for intellectual property and data privacy rights.

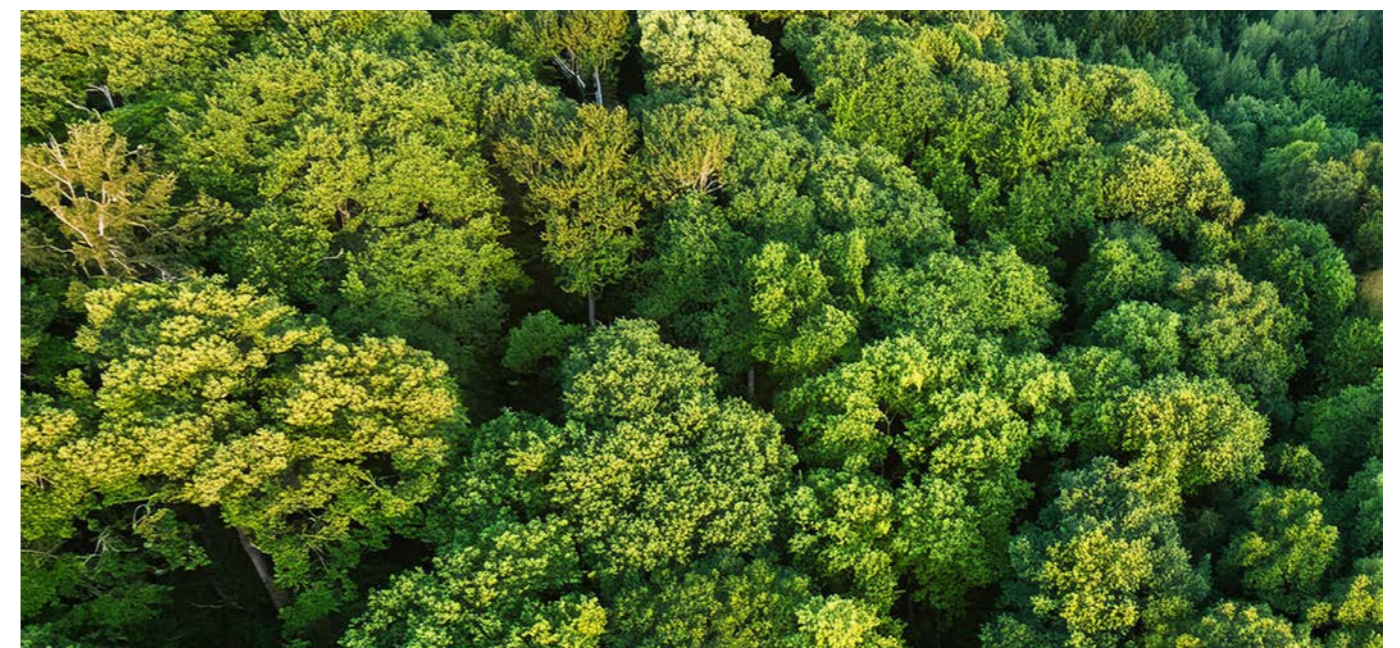
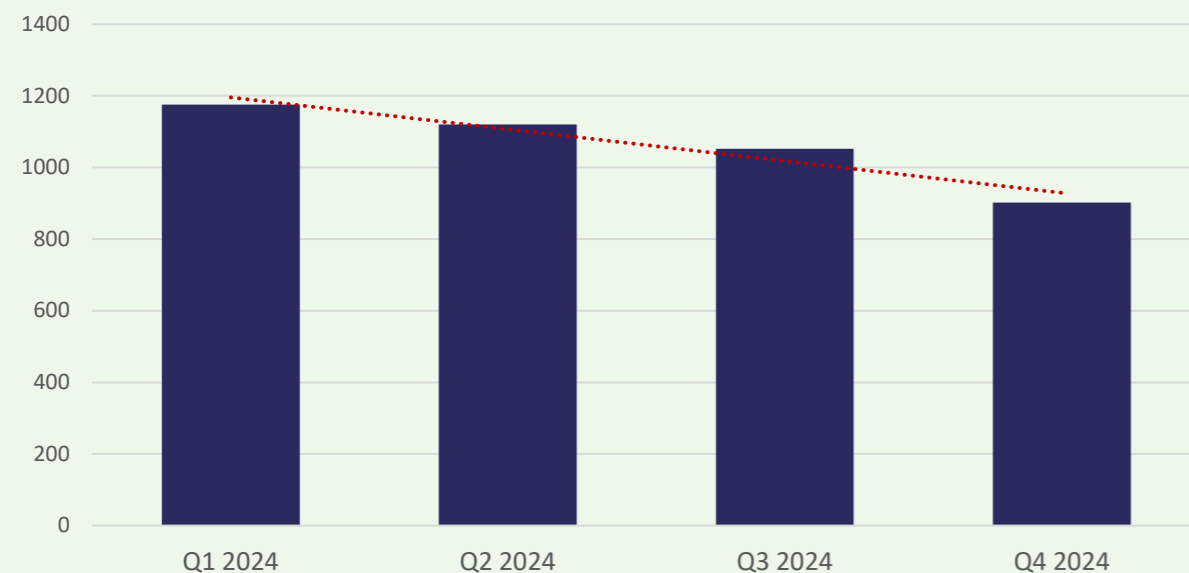
Governance

Coverage of thought leadership focusing on governance rose by more than fifth, although as in previous reports the raw numbers remain much lower than for environmental and social coverage.

While the EDI agenda has also suffered from some politicisation, the significant coverage dedicated to reports on board diversity highlights that this is still a topic that commands wide interest.

As organisations quietly dispose of targets, and regulators such as the UK's FCA back away from the agenda, there will be plenty of white space for thought leaders to discuss what the consequences could be.

Coverage of thought leadership on ESG issues



Environment

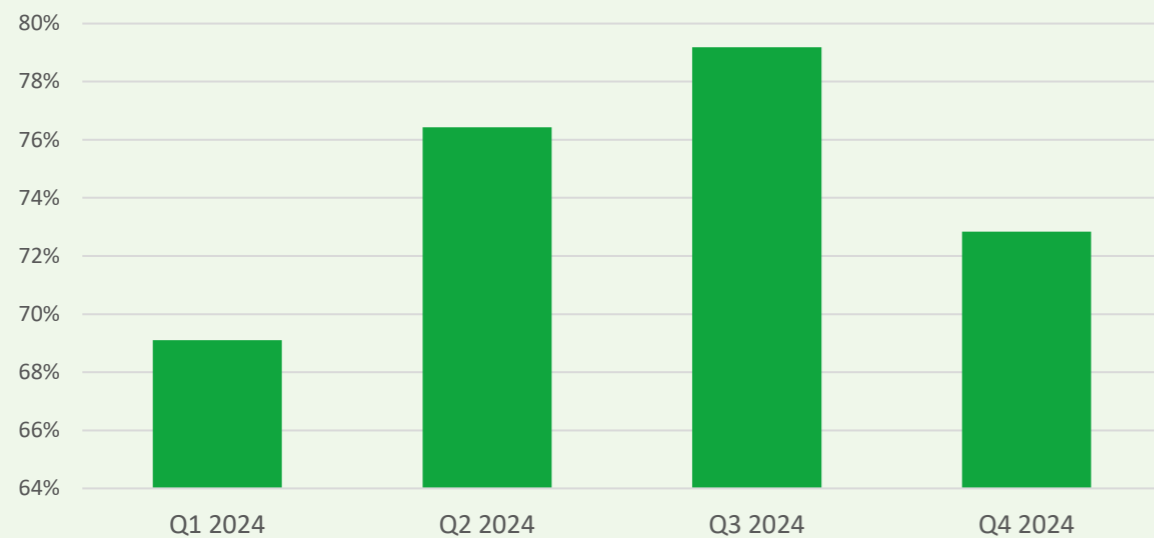
Media coverage of thought leadership on the environment dropped significantly in the last quarter of 2024, falling by 21% compared to the third quarter.

The COP29 conference in Azerbaijan took place during this period, but the controversy surrounding the hosts may have reduced media enthusiasm for building coverage around it. The consensus among many that the agreements reached did not go far enough to achieve what was needed has evidently contributed to a lack of media enthusiasm.

Interest may also have been dampened by other geopolitical considerations. The election of Donald Trump in the US, and the rise of right-wing parties

sceptical of the ESG agenda elsewhere, may have encouraged further 'greenhushing' - where organisations deliberately choose not to publicise their sustainability efforts. Thought leaders are often choosing to pivot away from a close focus on environmental issues and are exploring sustainability in a much broader sense. While environmental thought leadership made up 76% of overall coverage in the second quarter of 2024, and 79% of the third, it fell to 73% in the last quarter.

Environmental thought leadership as a percentage of overall coverage



Green shoots

Nonetheless, within environmental coverage there were some topics that attracted more media attention. Thought leadership on 'carbon footprint', 'climate finance' and 'environmental impact' did better than in the previous quarter. As others pull back, there will be greater opportunities for thought leaders to step into the space that they leave vacant.

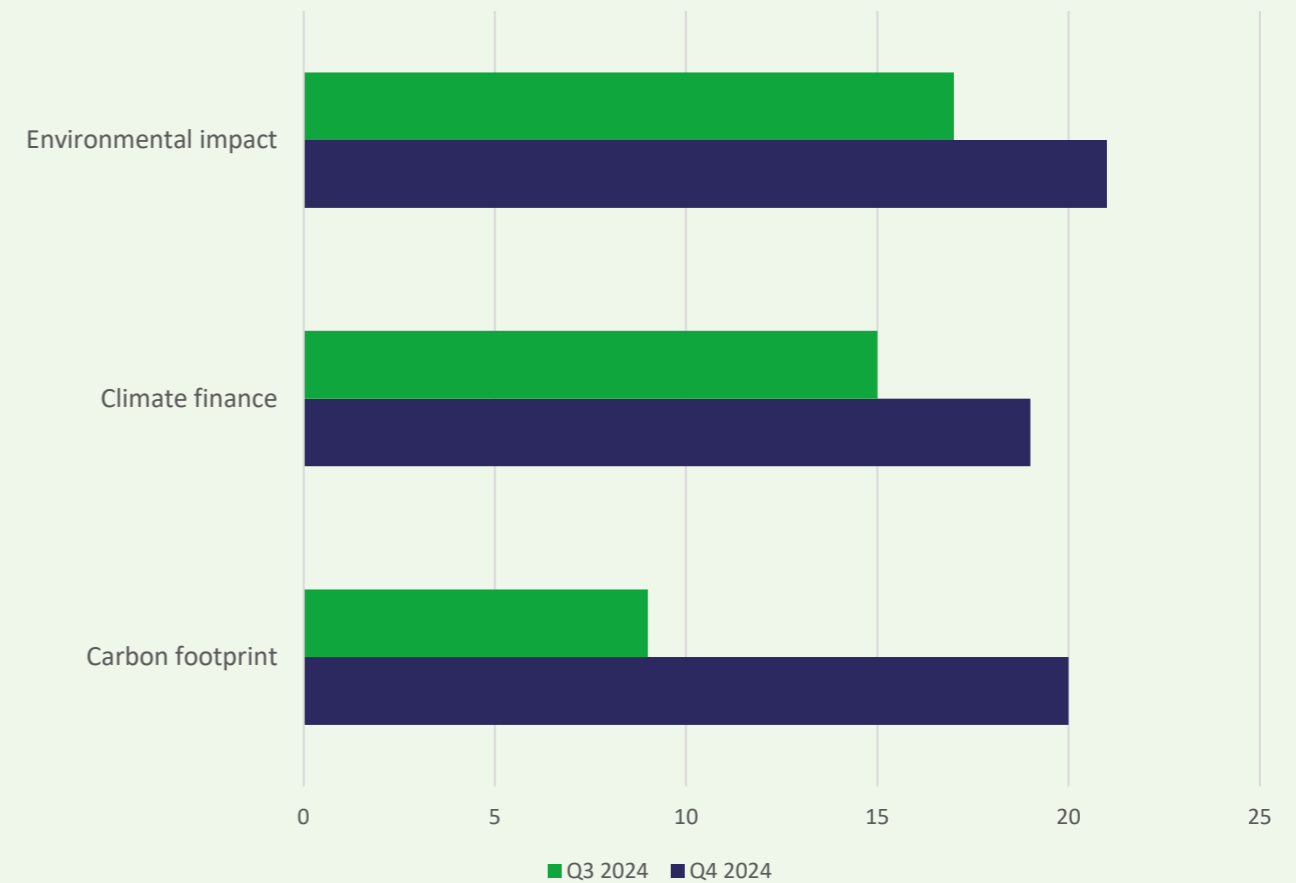
Heading into COP, the BBC gave prominence to a number of pieces of environmental thought leadership, including one from the Lancet Countdown on Health

and Climate Change, which found that 48% of the Earth's land surface had at least one month of extreme drought last year.¹

Another article highlighted research from the World Weather Attribution (WWA) group at Imperial College London, which found that human-caused climate change made the ten deadliest extreme weather events of the last 20 years more intense and more likely.² These reports were effective at providing the media with simple ways to explain the scale of the challenge facing delegates.

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/clyvje458rvo>
 2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cdxvkn10xz2o>

Number of articles in Q3 2024 versus Q4 2024



Heated discussion

Thought leadership also continues to do well when it taps into existing media narratives. In December, UK newspapers covered an Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report on the impact of woodburning stoves. The report was used by many, including the Daily Mail, to explore questions around individual choice versus wider social responsibility.³ With the report coming out in December, thought leadership on heating methods was especially well timed, and the IFS was rewarded through significant coverage and debate.

One story on carbon footprint which gained significant traction – especially on social media – was a report that TikTok's annual carbon footprint is likely bigger

than Greece's.⁴ As well as contextualising the carbon footprint of TikTok in a way that is tangible, the story also spoke to an environmental concern that has rapidly risen up the agenda: the resources needed to satisfy ever greater demands for computing power.

Moreover, the research found that TikTok's emissions were higher than other social media companies' because users tend to stay on the app for longer – speaking to concerns about the addictiveness of the platform. New insights that can effectively link environmental findings to media interests outside of ESG give themselves a much better chance of cutting through.

3. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-14162135/Urgent-warning-trendy-wood-burning-stoves-dangerous-air-pollution.html>
 4. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/12/tiktok-carbon-footprint>

Social

Social thought leadership coverage increased by 10% in the last quarter of 2024, driven by an uptick in coverage of topics including inclusion, sourcing and data security.

Throughout the US election campaign and following Trump's election in November, much of the debate around ESG and sustainability focused on the newly-elected President's 'anti-woke' agenda, much of which was focused on environmental policies, particularly the Paris Climate Accord and his promise to 'drill, baby, drill'.

Given this changing sustainability landscape, at the end of 2024 many organisations increasingly focused their thought leadership on the social element of sustainability and produced insights that would avoid the environmental debate whilst still garnering media attention on topics pertinent to the public.

This was reflected in the percentages of overall coverage – as the environmental category fell as a percentage of overall ESG coverage, social coverage increased.

Inclusive coverage

Inclusion coverage jumped by more than half in Q4 last year, increasing by 69%. Pick-up of thought leadership on inclusion was partly fuelled by organisations presenting alternative narratives on familiar topics.

For instance, a study commissioned by UK Youth and KFC received significant coverage by looking at inclusion

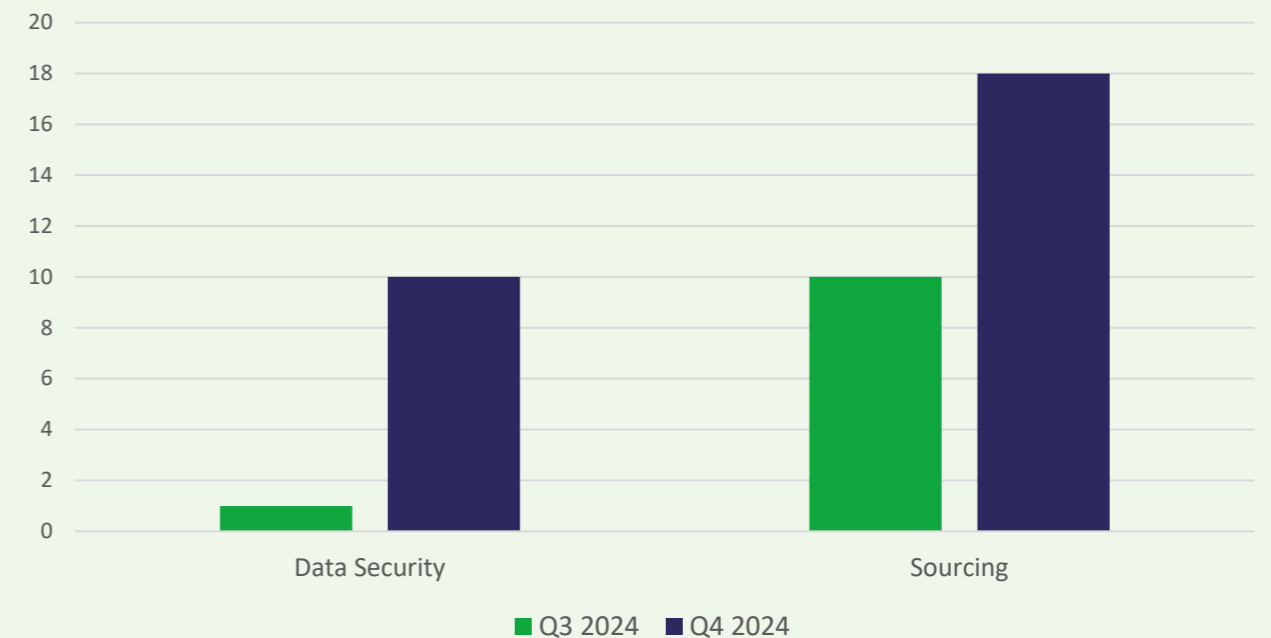
through the lens of age, finding that more than nine in 10 young workers have experienced negative treatment at work because of their age. The top issues faced by young people in the workplace include feeling undervalued and patronised.⁵ Nearly one in ten of the 500 employers surveyed confessed to rejecting a young candidate for work due to their age.

Another age-focused report on inclusion that received coverage in the same way was from the Sutton Trust which found that young people from working-class backgrounds are being 'blocked' from entering the creative industries, which remain 'elitist' and 'inaccessible'.⁶ The report captured attention by emphasising surprising statistics and comparing class divides between UK universities.

These reports' success lay in an ability to provide an alternative narrative and invert the familiar ways of thinking about age discrimination.

Another example of a thought leadership report successfully doing this was a study on pregnancy support for men, recommending that expectant fathers should receive more mental health support.

Coverage of thought leadership on data security and sourcing



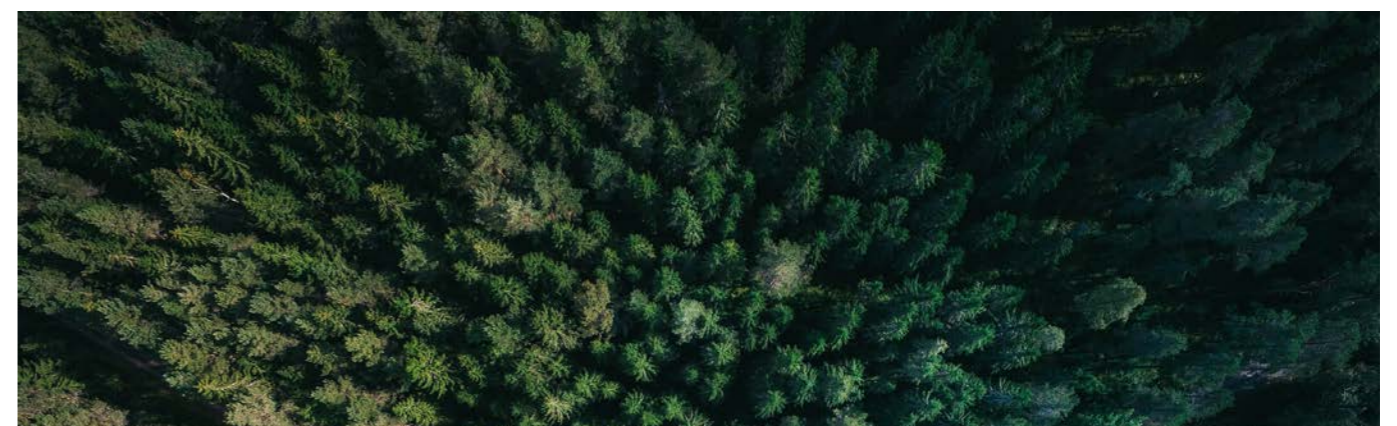
Driving media interest

Coverage of thought leadership on sourcing and data significantly increased in the last quarter of 2024. Two studies that received particular media attention used popular consumer goods to shine a light on issues related to sustainability.

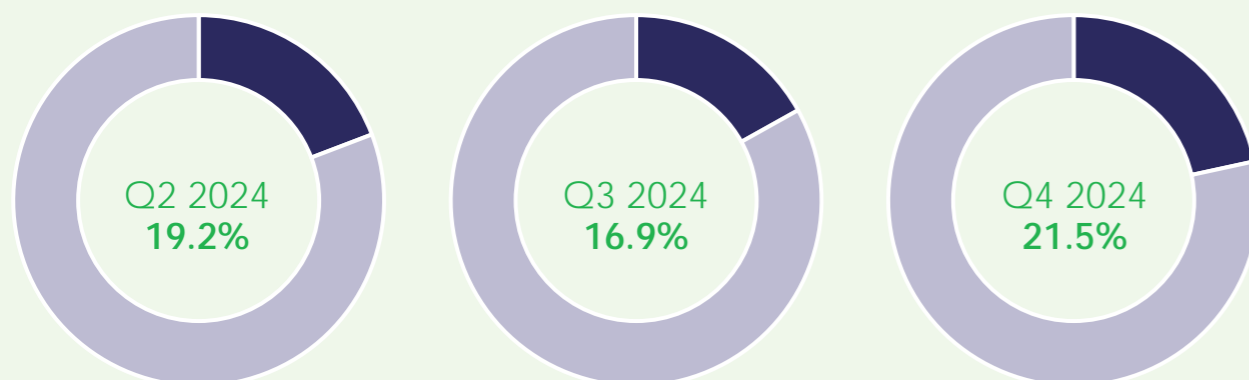
One highlighted that car manufacturers are fuelling human rights abuses by failing to responsibly source the critical minerals needed for electric vehicle batteries.⁷ It warned that the rush to extract minerals for the energy transition has a 'dark side'.

Another warned that several popular air fryers are spying on users, finding that the devices listen in on users' conversations with smart tech manufacturers and the firms they work with currently able to collect data with little or no transparency.⁸

By revealing the social impact of common and everyday items, these reports successfully made the sustainability agenda and its importance less abstract, encouraging media interest.



Social thought leadership as a percentage of overall coverage



5. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1990217/bias-against-young-employees-workplace>

6. <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/news/young-working-class-adults-underrepresented-in-creative-jobs>

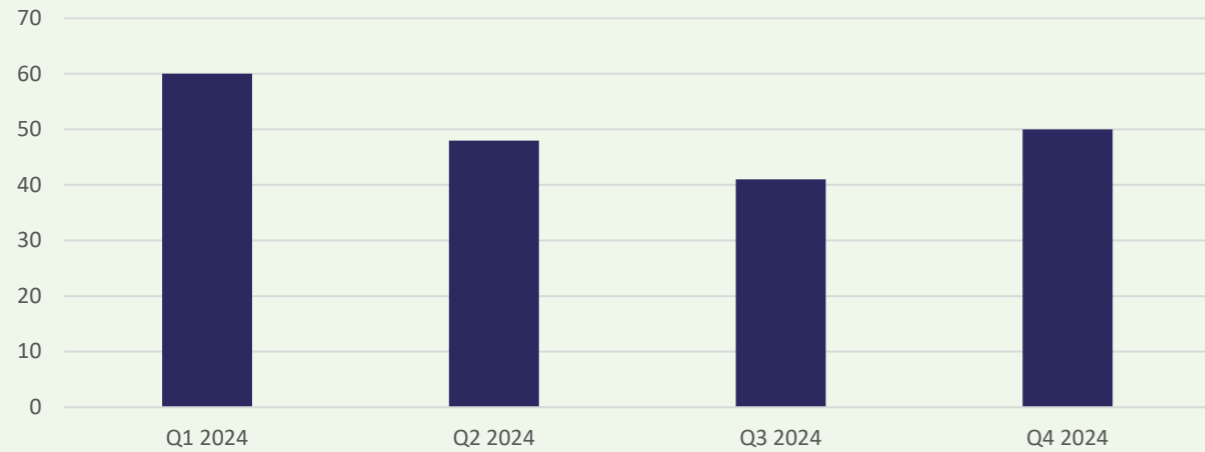
7. <https://inews.co.uk/news/business/electric-cars-fuel-human-rights-abuses-3324065>

8. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/galleries/article-14042879/Urgent-warning-air-fryer-users-spying-you.html>

Governance

This quarter saw a rebound in governance coverage, with 22% more media stories than the last quarter. Governance thought leadership hit its highest coverage total since the first quarter of 2024.

Coverage of thought leadership on governance



This was driven by a significant increase in coverage linked to board diversity, which was boosted over fears that the push to increase diversity on UK boards has slowed, as well as broader media coverage on diversity, equity and inclusion as a result of the US election. A slighter growth in coverage was also seen for thought leadership on corporate behaviour while tax transparency coverage also remained high.

However certain sub-topics such as stewardship experienced notable declines in this quarter, decreasing by 47%.

Board diversity under scrutiny

Board diversity coverage in the UK was driven by new analysis published by headhunters Spencer Stuart, which showed that the push to diversify boardrooms is stalling, with the number of new directors from self-declared ethnic minority backgrounds dropping for the first time since 2019 and women still struggling to occupy the most senior roles.⁹

In the US, a study published by The Conference Board on Russell 3000 directors found that while these corporate boards are more diverse than ever, growth in racial diversity among new directors is also slowing.¹⁰

9. <https://www.spencerstuart.com/research-and-insight/uk-board-index/diversity>

10. <https://www.conference-board.org/press/board-composition-2024>

11. <https://www.ftadviser.com/diversity-inclusion/2025/3/12/fca-scrap-plans-for-diversity-and-inclusion-rules/>

12. <https://www.ukfinance.org.uk/policy-and-guidance/reports-and-publications/2024-total-tax-contribution-uk-banking-sector>

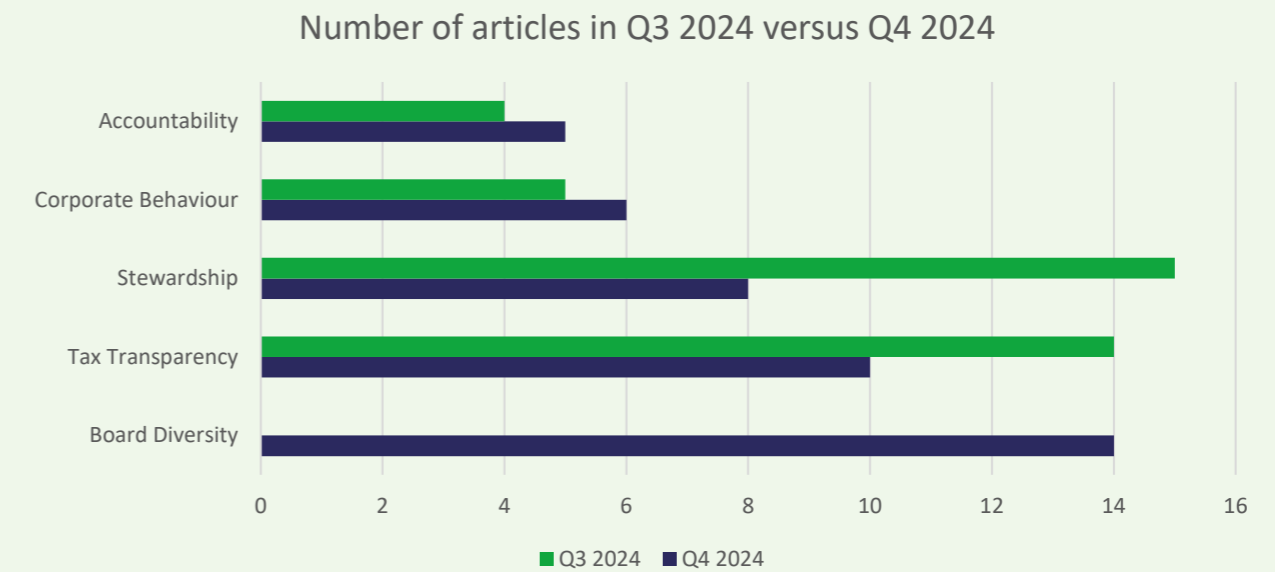
The UK FCA recently announced that it will abandon proposed rules on diversity and inclusion, showing how as attitudes towards the DEI agenda evolve, the impact on corporate governance, compliance, and overall strategy could be significant.¹¹ Thought leadership that examines how these differing requirements shape organisational outcomes will therefore have significant cut through.

Tax policies in the spotlight

Coverage of tax transparency remained high on the agenda in Q4 2024, with UK Finance publishing its 2024 report on the banking sector's total tax contribution.¹² This found that the total tax contributions of the UK banking sector reached £44.8 billion, compared to £41 billion the previous year.

Internationally, tax coverage was driven by President Trump's return to the White House. The new administration could reverse moves towards tax reform, in particular the OECD's 'Two-Pillar Solution' for taxing the digital economy, which aims to enforce a 15% global minimum tax on large multinationals.

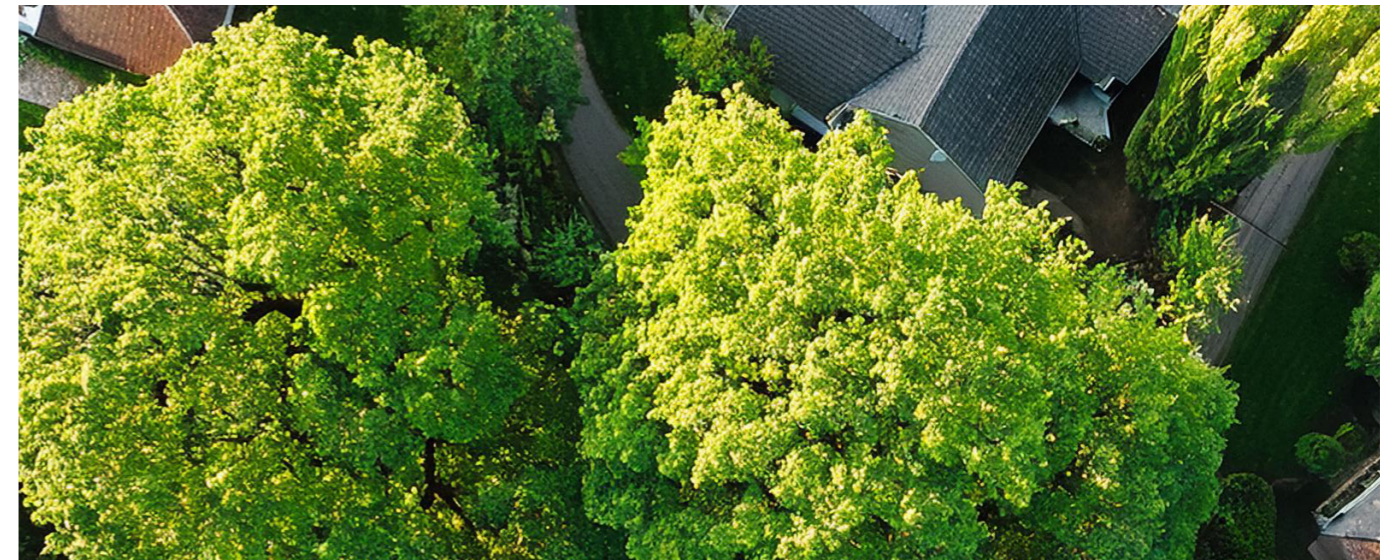
Number of articles in Q3 2024 versus Q4 2024



Thought leadership that contrasts the impact of domestic and international tax regimes, and that captures the difficulty organisations face as they adapt to rules being changed, is likely to gain traction in the media.

Q4 2024 also saw the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, announce significant tax rises during the Budget, with the measures estimated to raised £40 billion. Many of these changes have been criticised

as anti-business, with the rise in employers' National Insurance Contributions in particular cited as a measure that will inhibit businesses' ability to hire more workers. With these changes coming into effect in April, there is an opportunity for thought leaders to measure the extent of the Budget's impact.



Recommendations

While political change has built a sense that the zeitgeist is moving away from the sustainability agenda, our analysis shows that in fact social and governance topics are increasingly being followed. Environmental issues are experiencing a lull, almost undoubtedly as organisations take a pause to assess the overall direction of sentiment. What is clear is that organisations can still win attention for their insights if they choose the right topics and present their findings in a compelling way. Below, we set out our key recommendations for organisations to frame their insights so that they are as relevant and eye-catching as possible.

Environmental

- > A COP that underwhelmed many arguably depressed media coverage of environmental thought leadership, and has fed into a sense that this agenda is losing support. However, coverage on the impact of wood stoves shows that environmental research still resonates where it touches on issues that are tangible to a wide audience.
- > As others take a ‘wait and see’ approach, there is an opportunity for those with high conviction in the sustainability agenda to take on a more prominent role in the debate.
- > AI is a topic that achieves consistent and considerable coverage. Sustainability thought leaders can tap into this interest by exploring some of the environmental challenges that it poses.

Social

- > Social thought leadership will be seen by many organisations as a safer bet than environmental topics, and offers thought leaders plenty of opportunities to engage with important issues that are pertinent to the public.
- > Well-covered reports on age discrimination against young people shows that thought leadership that can challenge perceptions of who is affected by a lack of inclusion will do well.

Governance

- > As organisations in the UK and US adopt different approaches to diversity, thought leadership should investigate the business case for diversity, beyond compliance requirements, and strategies for maintaining momentum.
- > As tax competitiveness and tax transparency priorities clash, thought leadership in this area should focus on whether the UK’s current tax regime is still a competitive offering for businesses as well as making a positive case for increased transparency measures.

Methodology



Luther Pendragon uses an AI-powered media monitoring platform to analyse all UK national media online and print output during the set period, identifying thought leadership on ESG. Each category was divided into ten subcategories, which covered the spectrum of ESG topics and have all been reported on during the set period.

To identify relevant articles, all UK national media output is monitored using a custom thought leadership filter, which identifies articles focusing on the publication of new research. Qualifying articles must refer to one of the 30 ESG subcategory terms in the headline or opening paragraphs, indicating that the subcategory in question is relevant to the article. The media monitoring platform uses artificial intelligence to build an understanding of the search it is executing, and exclude articles which are not relevant.

Environmental	Social	Governance
Carbon footprint	Gender equality	Corporate governance
Climate change	Racial equality	Board diversity
Carbon emissions	Diversity	Stewardship
Climate finance	Inclusion	Tax transparency
Pollution	Community relations	Business ethics
Biodiversity	Labour relations	Legal compliance
Sustainability	Data security	Accountability
Environmental impact	Privacy	Stakeholder relations
Natural resources	Reputation	Executive pay
Renewable energy	Sourcing	Corporate behaviour

Have a question about communications and thought leadership around the sustainability agenda?

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