
Thinking Matters Symposium

2021 Thinking Matters Symposium

Apr 30th, 12:00 AM

Media Analysis of Coverage of Environmental Issues in the Midst of a Pandemic

Alexandria N. Miller

University of Southern Maine, alexandria.miller@maine.edu

Lucia A. Bolles

University of Southern Maine, lucia.bolles@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium>



Part of the [Environmental Education Commons](#), [Environmental Health and Protection Commons](#), and the [Other Immunology and Infectious Disease Commons](#)

Miller, Alexandria N. and Bolles, Lucia A., "Media Analysis of Coverage of Environmental Issues in the Midst of a Pandemic" (2021). *Thinking Matters Symposium*. 30.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/thinking-matters-symposium/2021/poster-sessions/30>

This Poster Session is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thinking Matters Symposium by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

ABSTRACT

- This research aimed to answer the question “has the coronavirus impacted the print media’s coverage of important environmental issues?”
- Two different print newspapers were analyzed: The New York Times (NYT) and the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) to determine if there was a change in coverage of environmental news as the coronavirus spread in the US.
- Our findings showed a 78.85% decrease in coverage of environmental issues between 2019 and 2020.
- This research is an essential first step in quantifying the impacts of major global events on the Media Attention Cycle and coverage of environmental events.
- It’s important environmental news coverage is not interrupted to frame climate change as an urgent threat to our planet and societies.

INTRODUCTION

- The Media Attention Cycle theory (Downs, 1972) claims that there is a positive dual-direction feedback loop between media attention to an issue and public interest and knowledge about said issue.
- Pursuant to the theory, the more information published by the media, the more the public is informed about issues (Sampei & Aoyagi-Usui, 2009).
- The 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19/SARS-Cov-2) has caused a long term interruption to the Media Attention cycle.
- In the meantime, other issues are being pushed off of the media agenda.
- The aim of this research was to extract and analyze data from two print media sources that vary slightly in their standings on the Pew Research Center’s Ideological Placement of Each Sources Audience chart.
- Our focus was to understand how the coronavirus impacts news coverage of other long term global crises, specifically climate change and the environment.

METHODS

- From the newspaper’s online archives, data was gathered about the first 15 articles from both the NYT and the WSJ for the first four days of the months March-September for 2019 and 2020.
- For NYT, archived articles were listed in order of appearance in the paper, for WSJ the appearance in their archive is random. *Note that this does present a shortcoming of our methods.
- Stories were classified as environmentally related or not by reading each article to determine if it directly relates to or discusses a change in biogeochemical conditions.
- Basic statistical analysis quantified the frequency of environmental stories relative to the frequency of occurrence during the start of the pandemic through the last full month prior to research for this study.

New York Times 2019

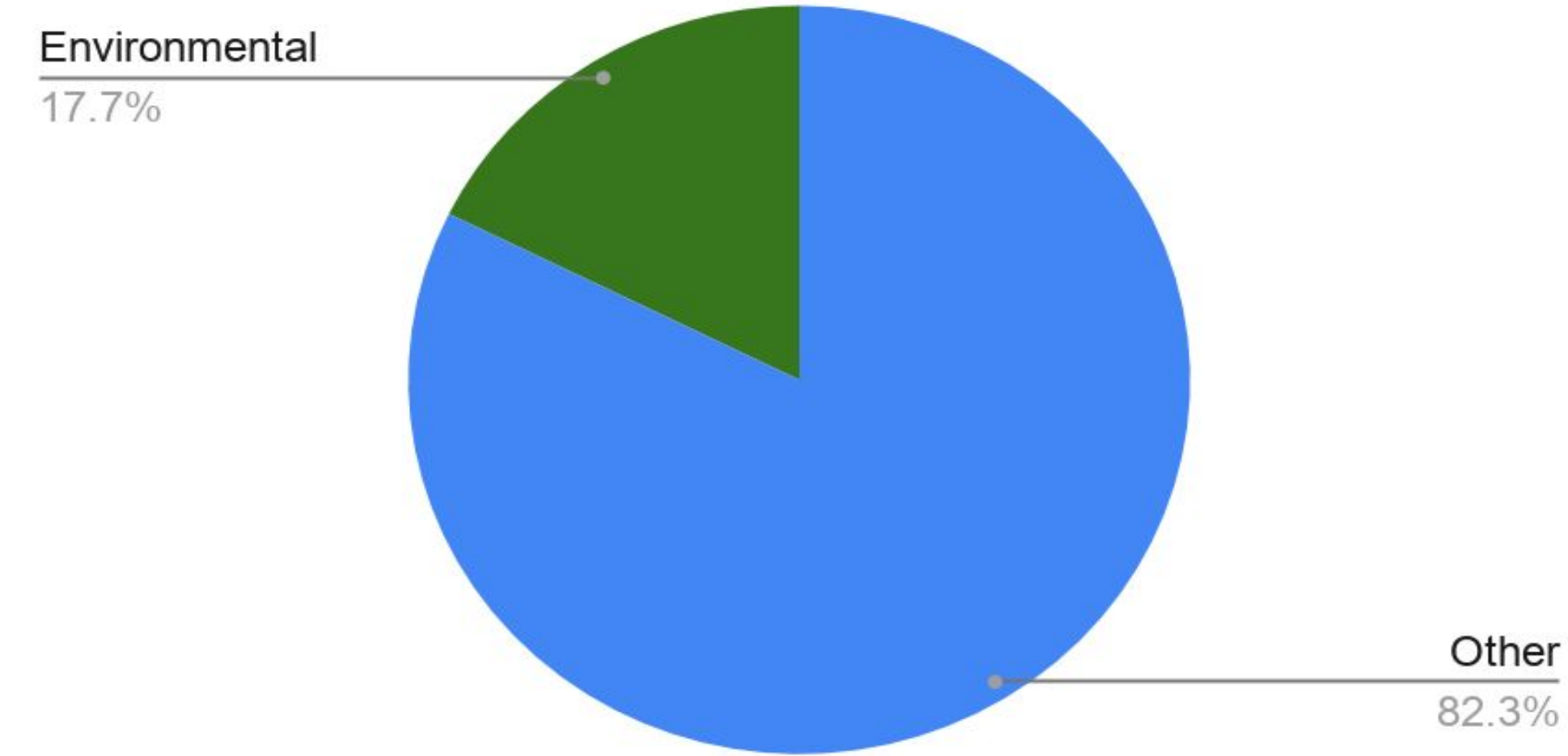


Figure 1. Composition of New York Times article themes between the 1st and 4th of every month March through September, 2019.

Wall Street Journal 2019

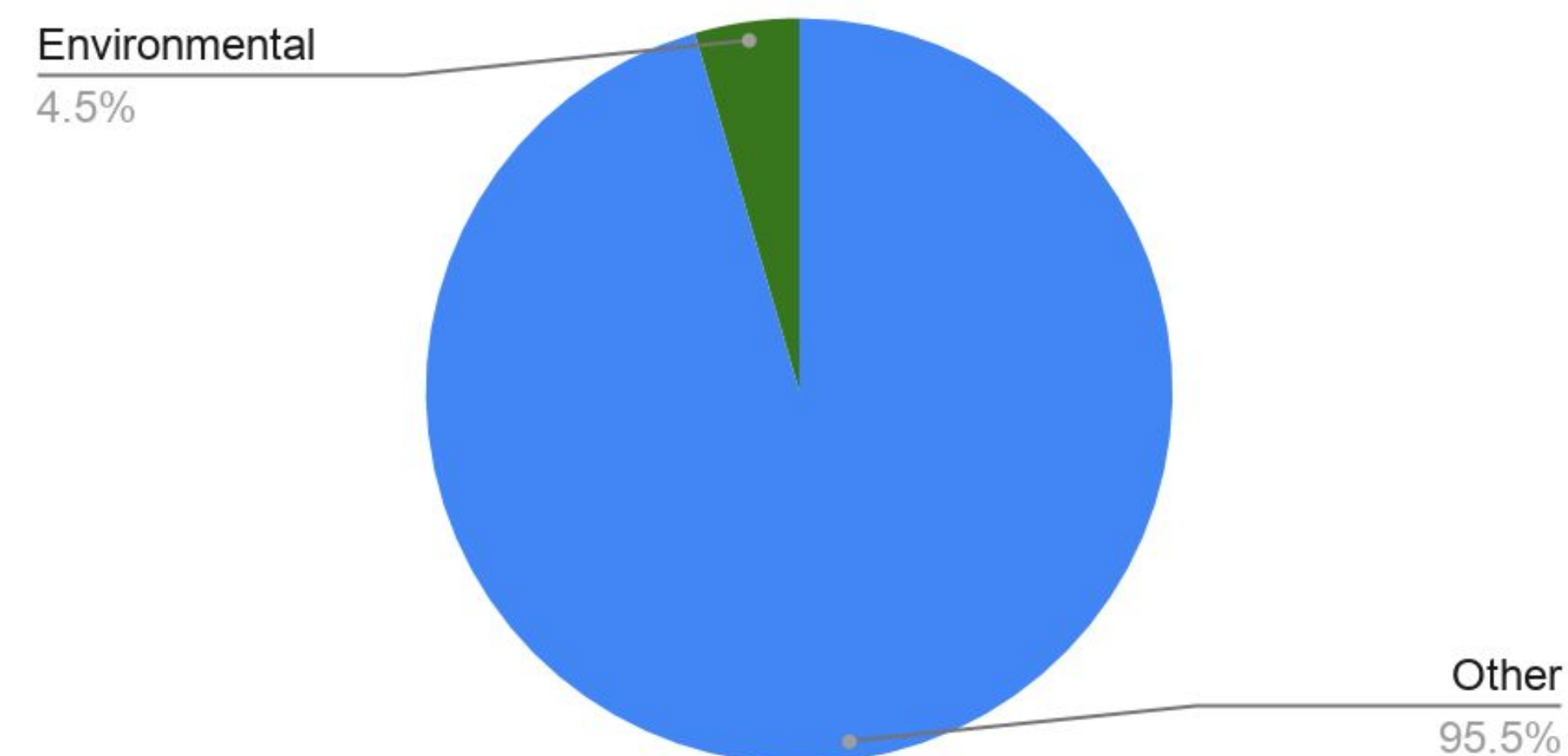


Figure 2. Composition of Wall Street Journal article themes between the 1st and 4th of every month March through September, 2019.

New York Times 2020

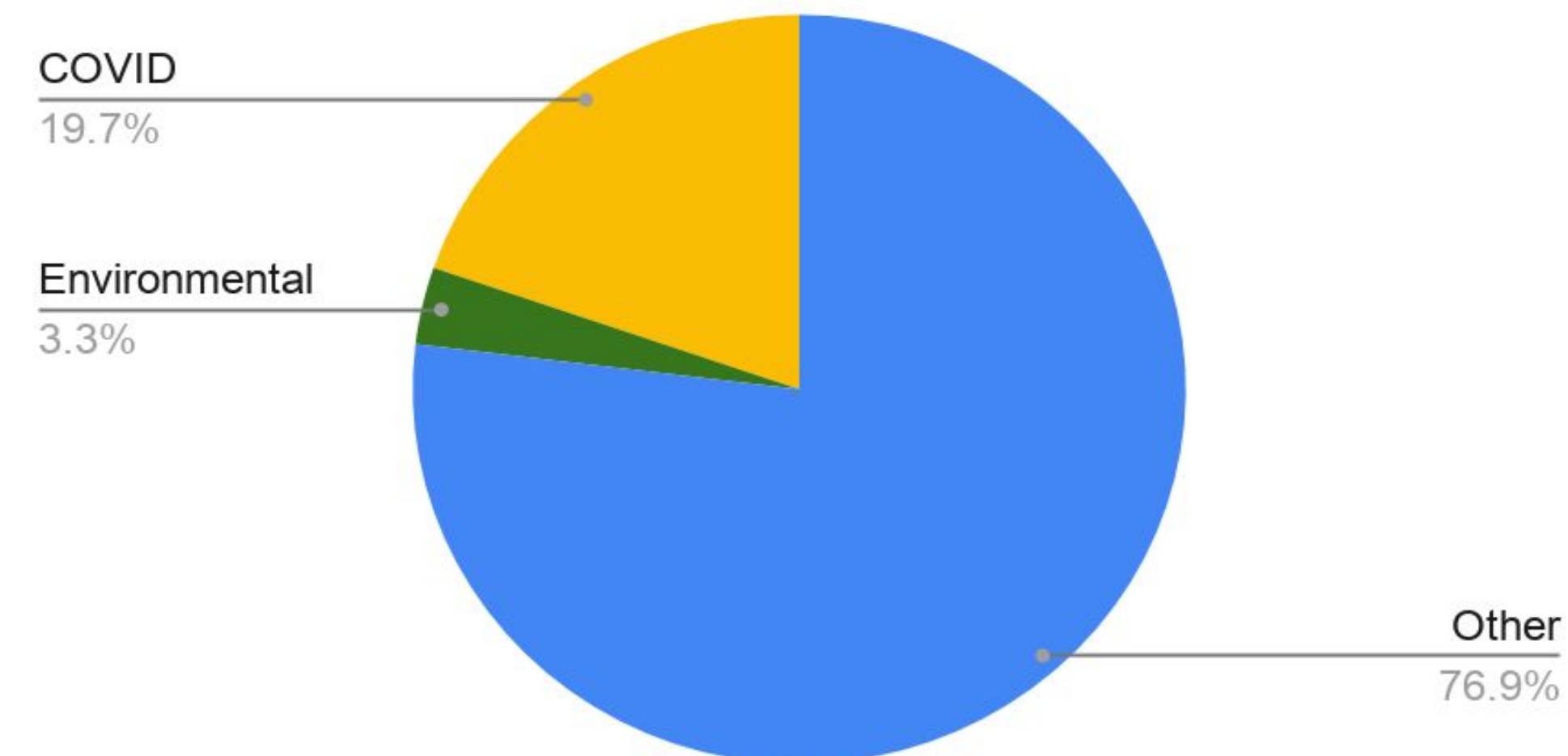


Figure 3. Composition of New York Times article themes between the 1st and 4th of every month March through September, 2020.

Wall Street Journal 2020

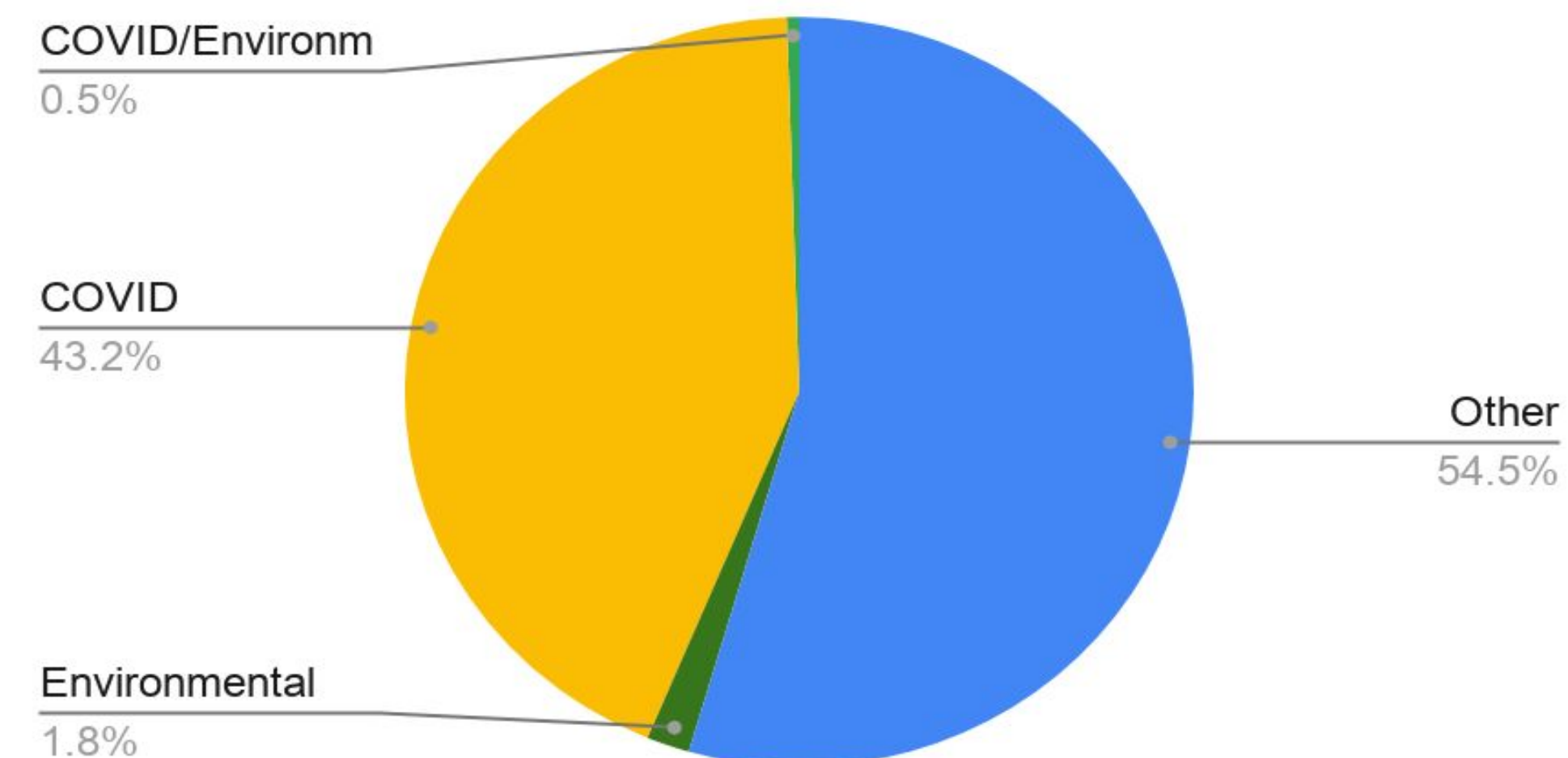


Figure 4. Composition of Wall Street Journal article themes between the 1st and 4th of every month March through September, 2020.

RESULTS

- Stories related to the Coronavirus pandemic accounted for 31.9% of all stories published by the two papers in 2020.
- In 2019, 17.7% of NYT articles and 4.5% of WSJ articles were environmental related (Figs 1, 2).
- In 2020, these numbers dropped to 3.3% and 1.8%, respectively (Figs 2, 3).
- Coronavirus related articles accounted for 19.7% and 43.2% for the NYT and WSJ (Figures 3, 4).
- WSJ had 2 stories (0.5%) that discussed both COVID and the environment.
- There was a 84% drop on environmental articles in the NYT between 2019 and 2020, and a 65% drop in the WSJ.
- 2019, the NYT wrote 76.2% more environmental Articles than the WS. This number dropped to 46.2% in 2020.,
- WJS wrote 125.97% more articles about COVID than the NYT.
- In 2020, nearly 20% NYT stories were related to the pandemic. In the WSJ, this number jumps to nearly 45%.

DISCUSSION

- WSJ likely had more COVID stories because they published many relating to the economic toll of the virus.
- The WSJ saw a larger drop in environmental stories between 2019 and 2020 likely because they published so few pre-COVID and even less during COVID.
- An increase in COVID related stories correlated to a decrease in stories relating to the environment, confirming that discussion of environmental issues in print media has been impacted by the pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Dr. Staples and Dr. Levesque for overseeing and supporting this research, as well as the entire ESP department at the University of Southern Maine.

REFERENCES

Bakaki, Z., Böhmelt, T., & Ward, H. (2019). The triangular relationship between public concern for environmental issues, policy output, and media attention. *Environmental Politics*, 1-21. doi:10.1080/09644016.2019.1655188

Boykoff, M. T. (2008). Lost in translation? United States television news coverage of anthropogenic climate change, 1995–2004. *Climatic Change*, 86(1-2), 1-11. doi:10.1007/s10584-007-9299-3

Brownstein, J. S., Holford, T. R., & Fish, D. (2005). Effect of Climate Change on Lyme Disease Risk in North America. *EcoHealth*, 2(1), 38–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10393-004-0139-x>

Castrechini, A., Pol, E., & Guàrdia-Olmos, J. (2014). Media representations of environmental issues: From scientific to political discourse. *European Review of Applied Psychology*, 64(5), 213-220. doi:10.1016/j.erap.2014.08.003

Downs, Anthony. 1972. “Up and Down with Ecology: The ‘Issue-Attention’ Cycle.” *The Public Interest*, 28: 38–50.

Jönsson, A. M. (2011). Framing Environmental Risks in the Baltic Sea: A News Media Analysis. *Ambio*, 40(2), 121-132. doi:10.1007/s13280-010-0124-2

Merino, D. (2020, August 18). The First Undeniable Climate Change Deaths. Retrieved November 23, 2020, from <https://eos.org/articles/the-first-undeniable-climate-change-deaths>

Sampei, Y., & Aoyagi-Usui, M. (2009). Mass-media coverage, its influence on public awareness of climate-change issues, and implications for Japan’s national campaign to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. *Global Environmental Change*, 19(2), 203-212. doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2008.10.005

Sparry, S. (2020, April 17). Space images of Venice show how coronavirus has changed the city’s iconic canals. Retrieved November 23, 2020, from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/16/europe/venice-space-satellite-images-canals-scli-intl-scn/index.html>

Young, N., & Dugas, E. (2012). Comparing Climate Change Coverage in Canadian English and French-Language Print Media: Environmental Values, Media Cultures, and the Narration of Global Warming. *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 37(1), 25-54. doi:10.29173/cjs9733