

TURNING CLEAN ENERGY INTO A VERB:

Engaging Communities of
Color with Effective Clean
Energy Communication
Strategies

Presented By





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Executive Summary

KQ Communications is a Black-owned PR and communications agency whose mission is to promote the work of small businesses and organizations doing good for their communities. We recognize that people of color are sometimes left out of many conversations in various industries and clean energy is no different. This study aims to close the gap between communications professionals in clean energy and the communities of color whom they aim to include in the fight against climate change.

At the nexus of these two ideas — diversity and clean energy — are people trying to pay their bills and contribute to their families and communities. And while the shift to clean energy will touch every life in some way, we wanted to know more about how clean energy initiatives, opportunities, and challenges are being communicated to communities who are historically underrepresented in the conversation; from practitioners to community members.

Considering our firm's location in the South and the energy justice needs in the region, we focused on professionals and underrepresented community members living in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. We interviewed 11 clean energy professionals¹ and surveyed 321 Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) individuals living in the Southern United States².

The survey findings indicate that a little over half of BIPOC community members are aware of and understand clean energy. Local news, specifically television, reigns as a popular medium for learning about clean energy for all respondents, while social media dominates for respondents 18-24. Rural communities are more likely to never think about clean energy, while their urban counterparts think about it multiple times a week.

The insights gleaned from the clean energy professionals' interviews set the foundation for developing key strategies and tactics to address trends or gaps within the survey. Regardless of the racial makeup of the community, communications professionals must work to understand their audiences to meet people where they are — not only physically but also temporally, emotionally, spiritually, and culturally.

This white paper breaks down key strategies and tactics that clean energy communications and community engagement professionals can implement to increase engagement and understanding of clean energy among BIPOC communities. Engagement with BIPOC and diverse communities must be purposeful. It's important for professionals to lean into their lived experiences, show up in spaces unrelated to clean energy to understand the community they are trying to reach, and show that their interest in the community is not singular.

¹See appendix A

²See appendix B for demographics

Key Findings



Sample: 11 clean energy & communication professionals / 321 BIPOC survey respondents from the South



54% of survey respondents have heard about clean energy and understand what it means



21% of respondents learned about clean energy from the local news



22% of rural BIPOC respondents never think about clean energy



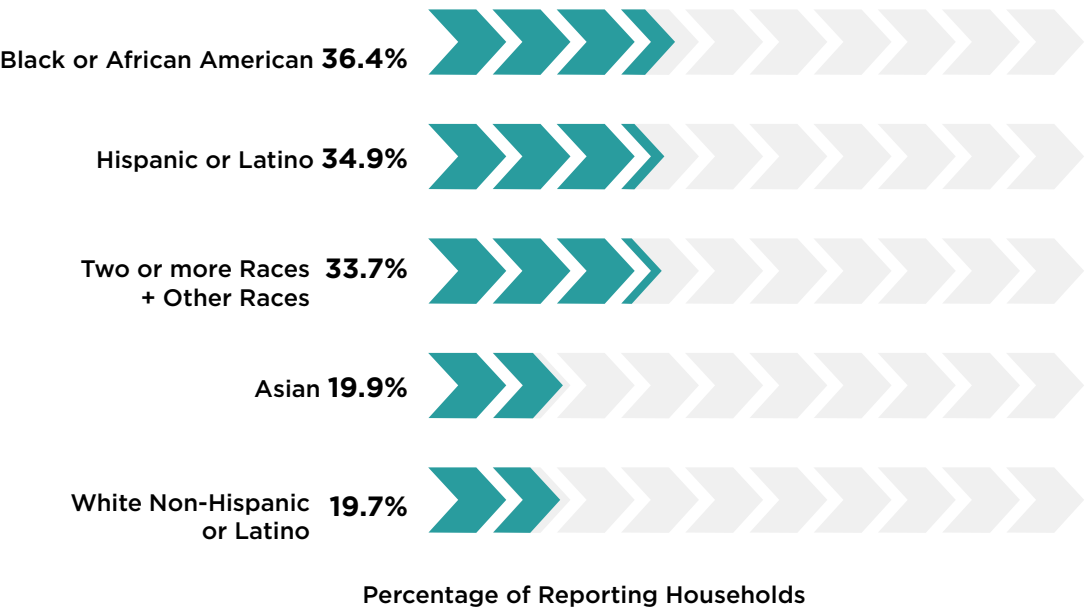
58% of 18-24 year-old BIPOC respondents want to learn about clean energy from social media, specifically YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok

Climate change, clean energy, and the inequitable burden on communities of color

According to the World Health Organization,³ climate change is a constant threat to human health. In recent years, many people across the globe have experienced natural disasters that have devastated their homes and forced people to relocate. Every year, Americans experience increasingly destructive floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, wildfires, and ice storms. According to Climate Central, winter cold streaks are getting shorter — shrinking an average of six days since 1970.⁴ Just as the winters are getting shorter, it's no surprise that summers are getting hotter. In 2023 for example, the Earth broke or tied its hottest day ever recorded four days in a row.⁵

These swings don't just have ramifications for people who like to ski in Breckenridge and swim at Miami Beach. These extremes are taxing our energy grid and costing families a lot of money (on top of intersecting social, economic, and health issues). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports⁶ that energy consumption has almost doubled since 1973.⁷ And these issues, like many in the United States, are not being shared equally among communities. The energy burden, which is understood as the percentage of a household's income spent on energy, disproportionately affects communities of color.⁸

Average Shares of U.S. Households Experiencing Energy Insecurity by Race, July 2021 - May 2023



www.energy.gov/justice/articles/households-color-continue-experience-energy-insecurity-disproportionately-higher

³Retrieved on 20 March 2024: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

⁴Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.climatecentral.org/climate-matters/shorter-cold-streaks-2024>

⁵Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.c2es.org/content/heat-waves-and-climate-change/>

⁶Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-residential-energy-use>

⁷This has remained more consistent in the last few years

⁸Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.nrdc.org/resources/energy-burdened-communities-tool>

For example, residents in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Alabama are paying upwards of 20% of their income on energy bills.⁹ In 2020, 34 million U.S. households struggled to pay their utility bill¹⁰ and more recent numbers suggest that one in seven families live in energy poverty.¹¹

“If you are in our region in the South [and] if you are Black, you are more likely to pay more on energy, with all other things controlled”

The biggest proof that climate change and the energy burden is higher on communities of color is the Department of Energy’s Justice40 Initiative. Justice40¹² is an initiative informed by multiple research studies with eight policy priorities designed to direct federal investments to disadvantaged communities. Investments include decreasing environmental exposure and burdens and increasing parity in clean energy technology, enterprise creation, contracting, jobs, and training for individuals from disadvantaged communities.

Issues affecting BIPOC communities:

- Energy burden – percentage of your income that goes towards energy is disproportionately high
- Energy access – Black U.S. citizens are less likely to have solar panels on their homes
- (Un)intentional exclusion regarding policy and initiatives
- Underrepresented in jobs and economic opportunities
- Worsening health outcomes – communities of color disproportionately suffer pollution-related health issues, from exposure to foregoing medical expenses to funnel money towards energy bills



Investment in clean energy has the opportunity to be part of the solution for both climate change and unjust energy burdens. In 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act¹³ allocated an additional 3.6 billion dollars in support of the restructuring of existing technologies into clean energy ventures. Large corporations like ExxonMobil say they see clean energy as a great equalizer. The company, worth over 413 billion dollars, states that energy availability is at the core of progress; and it envisions a world with more prosperity, people, and energy by 2050.¹⁴

But with all opportunities, communities can only participate if they are aware and understand. Many clean energy and energy justice¹⁵ advocates, proponents, and professionals have pointed out that there are considerable barriers (and opportunities) when communicating clean energy technologies, practices, and benefits to communities that have historically been excluded.

A focus on diversity. As diversity, equity, and inclusion practices are being questioned (at best) and dismantled (at worst), we know many organizations still want to better understand diverse audiences, whether that be diversity of race, age, religion, or other intersectional identities, because those commitments are working and worth it.¹⁶

Amid ongoing challenges to diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the clean energy sector, it is crucial to actively engage historically marginalized communities in conversations about clean energy initiatives. As a Black woman-owned strategic communications firm, KQ Communications is driven to amplify BIPOC voices and ensure their inclusion in discussions surrounding many topics, including clean energy. By bridging the communication gap between professionals in the field and communities of color, we strive to empower these vital voices to drive positive change and combat climate change with this paper. Our dedication to championing inclusivity and representation in the clean energy sector reflects our belief in the transformative power of diverse perspectives to create a more equitable and sustainable future for all.

What is energy justice?

Energy justice refers to the goal of achieving equity in both the social and economic participation in the energy system, while also remediating social, economic, and health burdens on those historically harmed by the energy system (“frontline communities”).

Energy justice explicitly centers the concerns of marginalized communities and aims to make energy more accessible, affordable, clean, and democratically managed for all communities. The practitioner and academic approaches to energy justice emphasize these process-related and distributive justice concerns.

⁹Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://rmi.org/1-in-7-families-live-in-energy-poverty-states-can-ease-that-burden/>.
¹⁰Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2023/1/11/23537727/gas-energy-bills-electricity-expensive-winter>
¹¹Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://rmi.org/1-in-7-families-live-in-energy-poverty-states-can-ease-that-burden/>
¹²Retrieved on 20 March 2024: <https://www.energy.gov/justice/justice40-initiative>

¹³Retrieved 20 March 2024: <https://www.energy.gov/lpo/inflation-reduction-act-2022>
¹⁴EXXON. (2023). ExxonMobil Global Outlook Executive Summary Our view to 2050.
¹⁵Retrieved on 5 April 2024 from: <https://iejusa.org/>
¹⁶Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/21/opinion/diversity-equity-inclusion-dei.html>

Clean energy in the South: Awareness, perceptions, challenges, and opportunities

To better understand the intersections of clean energy, community engagement, and communication strategies, we interviewed 11 clean energy professionals and surveyed citizens (n= 321). Given our location in the South and the energy justice needs in the region, we focused on professionals and underrepresented community members living in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

Interviews. Our interviews with clean energy professionals helped us better understand the challenges and opportunities facing those tasked with building trust, understanding their audiences, and communicating their messages.¹⁷ This sample was developed through some personal networks, cold calls to professionals working in the industry, and referrals from outreach efforts.

Survey. Our goal for the survey was to better understand what BIPOC community members know about clean energy, how they learn about clean energy, their understanding and opinion of the role clean energy plays in their daily lives, and communication preferences. We used the SurveyMonkey “Target Audience,” feature to send out a 25-question questionnaire (excluding demographics). We sent two surveys: one to participants in the seven Southern states and another to respondents who specifically identify as BIPOC in the seven Southern states.

¹⁷See Appendix A

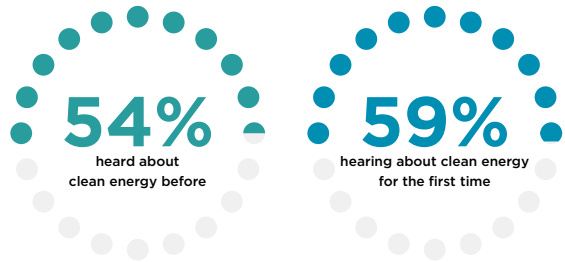


Results

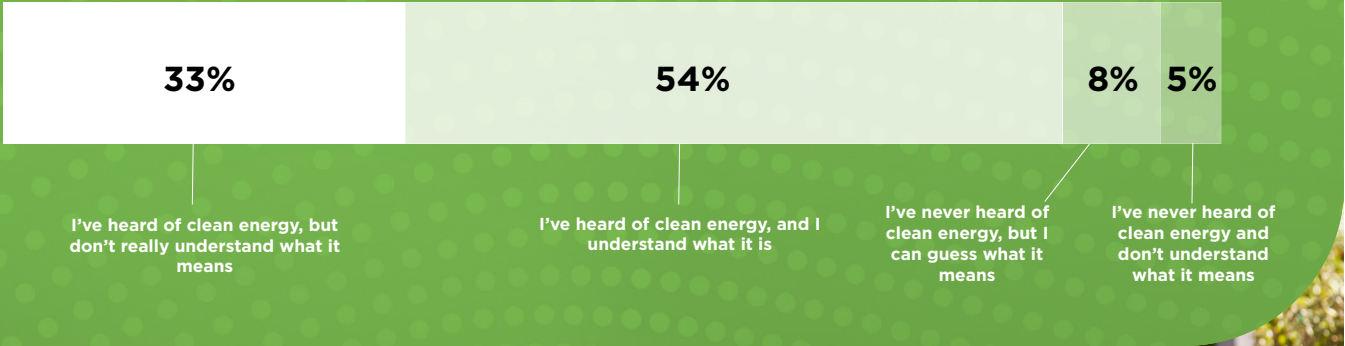
With all research projects, there are so many stories within the data to tell. For this project, we want to focus on what we’re calling “a starter story,” which is how clean energy is — and can be — communicated to Black and Brown individuals and communities. To do this, we explored the clean energy awareness, attitudes, and behaviors of BIPOC respondents.¹⁸ This project also takes a look into the intersection of race and age (18-24), and race and region as well, given that these were stakeholders our professionals identified as key to their work.

Awareness

Overall, **54%** of participants had heard about clean energy and understood what it meant. For many, this was a relatively new concept, with **59%** hearing about clean energy for the first time within the last four years.

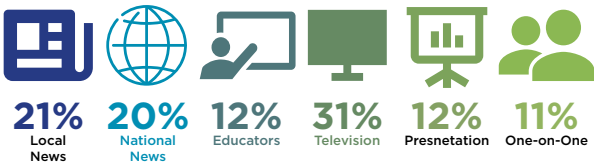


How familiar are you with the concept of clean energy?

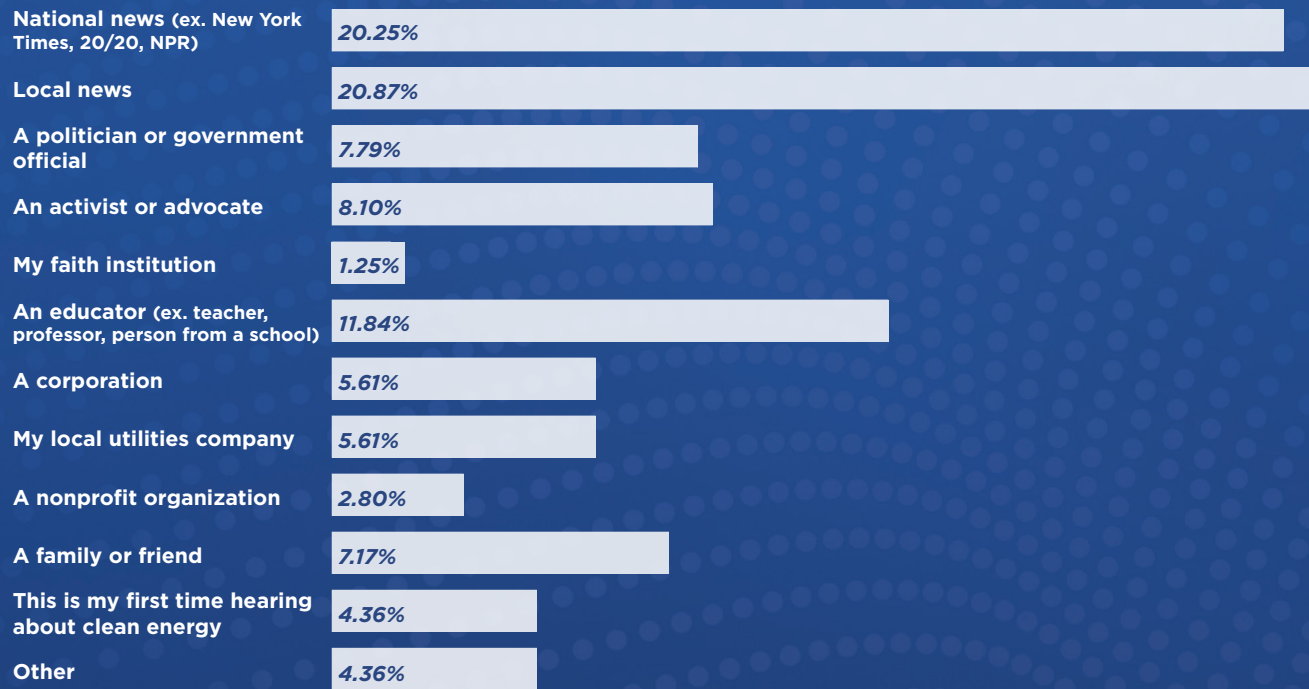


¹⁸These are descriptive findings

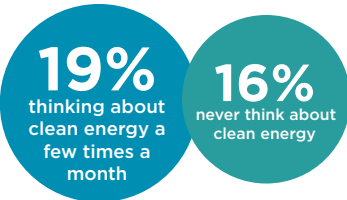
The most common way that respondents learned about clean energy was from local news (21%), national news (20%), and educators (12%). Once they were introduced to the topic, participants are likely to learn more from television news (31%), in-person presentations (12%), or a one-on-one conversation (11%).



Where do you think you first heard about clean energy?



Clean energy remains top-of-mind for the participants, with 19% thinking about clean energy a few times a month. That said, 16% of respondents noted that they never think about clean energy.



How often do you think about clean energy?



Clean energy in practice: What is it and how communities are talking about it

We wanted to get a sense of what types of energy people understand to be clean energy. According to survey participants, the top three types of clean energies were sun or solar, wind, and hydro, and the top three examples of clean energy in practice were solar panels, wind turbines, and electric cars.

This trend mirrors the conversations happening in communities as well. The top three energy conversations in BIPOC communities were solar energy (e.g., putting up solar panels), electric cars, and tied for third are utility bills and wind energy. This somewhat parallels how respondents see the importance of those conversations, with participants ranking solar energy, wind energy, and electric cars as the most important things they should be discussing with family, friends, and neighbors.

An opportunity to influence: Clean energy’s role in your life

While the previous findings suggest that participants were aware of, understood, and thought occasionally about clean energy, there is uncertainty or indifference regarding local clean energy initiatives and community engagement (Table 1).

This line of questions explored the topic of clean energy from a few different perspectives and asked participants to consider clean energy individually (e.g., my voice is important), at a community level (e.g., clean energy will bring my neighborhood jobs), nationally (e.g., clean energy should be a priority for the U.S.) and internationally (e.g., clean energy is a solution for climate change).



Table 1: Opinions on Clean Energy

Top Answer					
Opinion	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral/ Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly/Disagree
Clean energy is more expensive than other energy sources.	15%	32%	38%	11%	5%
There are efforts in my community to make clean energy more accessible.	13%	30%	40%	13%	4%
I feel my neighborhood and community are a priority for leaders when it comes to bringing in clean energy alternatives.	12%	25%	39%	17%	7%
Clean energy coming to my neighborhood will push people out of their homes.	11%	19%	33%	24%	12%
Clean energy initiatives in my neighborhood will bring jobs.	14%	35%	40%	7%	4%
Clean energy initiatives are fair to all people.	16%	30%	42%	8%	4%
Clean energy is a solution for climate change.	24%	38%	29%	4%	5%
Clean energy should be a priority for the U.S.	31%	38%	25%	4%	2%
I feel my voice is important in the clean energy conversation.	15%	35% (111 participants)	35% (112 participants)	12%	4%
A recent clean energy initiative considered my community's perspective.	15%	25%	30%	10%	2%

We found that participants opted to take a middle stand (neutral/neither agreeing or disagreeing) on all statements but two: clean energy is a solution for climate change and clean energy should be a priority for the U.S.¹⁹

This feedback suggests that the messaging and engagement around clean energy is working in the positive (agree and strongly agree) regarding participants’ national or international understanding, but they are struggling to find meaning or develop opinions around clean energy’s relationship to themselves and their communities. In other words, more often than not participants don’t disagree or agree with a lot of clean energy statements around efficacy, importance, and community impact.

It’s possible that the neutrality of Table 1 comes from how organizations are engaging with BIPOC communities. Participants feel organizations don’t prioritize issues that matter to their communities 30% and that organizations don’t include the community’s perspective or voice in these conversations 29%. That said, a quarter of respondents did acknowledge that organizations “focus on the positive.” It’s also important to note that 18% of respondents were not aware of any communication happening in their communities regarding clean energy.²⁰

What have you experienced when it comes to organizations (corporate, nonprofit, government, or advocacy) communicating with your community?	
I'm not aware of any communication happening about clean energy	18%
Materials are in different languages	8%
The materials are only in one language	6%
They do not provide a interpreter (spoken or ASL)	7%
They don't include us	29%
They focus on the positive	25%
They follow through with promises	12%
They get everyone's perspective	14%
They include a interpreter (spoken or ASL)	5%
They prioritize issues that don't matter to us	30%
They provide time and opportunity for me to share my perspective	13%
They seem thoughtful to individuals with certain needs (ex. childcare for meeting, accessible for people with disabilities)	10%
They talk down to us	23%
They use words we don't understand	22%

The uncertainty or indifference of Table 1, interpreted alongside the fact that respondents report a disengagement from organizations, suggests that there is room for collaboration, inclusion, and community-building. Respondents noted that the messaging they do receive is positive, but there is a disconnect between organizations and communities concerning capacity-building and a shared vision.

¹⁹While the percentages for “I feel my voice is important in the clean energy conversation” has “agree and neutral” at 35%, the neutral position has one more participant than the agree side.
²⁰This question asked participants: “What have you experienced when it comes to organizations (corporate, nonprofit, government, or advocacy) communicating with your community? Check all that apply.”

Communication preferences

When we asked participants how organizations can communicate clean energy opportunities to them, almost 40% of respondents marked that TV was their preferred source of information, followed by social media (36%), and presentations — both in person and virtual — tied for third with 29%. When it comes to the source- or messenger- participants prefer to hear this information from local and national news journalists and programs and local utility companies (below table). These companies should embody trustworthiness, a professional connection, and clear communication skills.

For social media, the more video-dominant platforms were preferred- with YouTube as the top platform for learning about clean energy (60%). Almost half of the participants wanted to learn about social media from Facebook (43%), followed by Instagram (39%). Survey respondents suggest that social media posts should focus on people who benefited from clean energy (47%) and people who work in clean energy (41%). Thankfully for social media professionals, only 2 and 7%,²¹ respectively, indicated that they don't use social media.



Preferred sources of clean energy information:



Characteristics of a clean energy source:



Understanding the data further: Community, ethnicity, and age

In addition to hearing more about diverse groups from a racial lens, we also wanted to understand the intersecting identities that clean energy professionals were prioritizing and/or struggling to connect with. In addition to race, clean energy professionals talked at length about wanting to communicate their messages with youth (Gen Z) and connect with urban and rural communities.



Community

How participants understand clean energy on a localized level was critical. Almost a quarter of our questions (six of our 26 questions, excluding the demographic question) explicitly asked about the respondent's community. Most respondents came from a suburban community (n = 110), followed by urban (n= 88), and rural (n= 55).²²

Demographics such as race and gender can considerably influence a communication strategy; but so can ZIP code, especially when it comes to the choice of medium. In 2022, Pew reported that broadband internet access is still a considerable challenge for rural communities.²³ In addition to access to technology services such as WiFi, the hardware technology itself can be an issue for rural Americans. For example, rural Americans are less likely to have a desktop or tablet computer than their suburban counterparts.²⁴ On the other hand, urban Americans don't have guaranteed access to broadband internet, but are more likely to have access to service coverage.²⁵

²¹"I don't use social media" was an option on two separate questions with 2% and 7% of respondents choosing this option.

²²Participants were not provided with definitions of urban, suburban, or rural, and therefore had to self-identify with what they felt best described their community.
²³Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/12/08/broadband-access-still-a-challenge-in-rural-affordable-housing>
²⁴Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/19/some-digital-divides-persist-between-rural-urban-and-suburban-america/>
²⁵Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2022/12/08/broadband-access-still-a-challenge-in-rural-affordable-housing>



Rural and Urban BIPOC respondents

For BIPOC respondents living in rural areas of the South, we saw a decrease in understanding of clean energy, which led to a decrease in frequency of thought. It’s notable, however, that even though rural BIPOC respondents were more likely to never think about clean energy — most agreed that their voice was important to the conversation. This could be due to the localized nature of the source (see Table 3). As our media audit identified, TV news provides more information and updates that directly affect people locally, including feel-good and human interest stories. Broadcast focuses more on conversations about specific aspects of clean energy as well. This specificity, in combination with human interest stories, could influence how rural respondents see their voice and position.²⁶

For urban BIPOC respondents, they were more likely to have a positive perspective regarding voice and potential for jobs in their community. They are thinking about clean energy the most of our total and rural participants, with 19% thinking about clean energy multiple times a week.

Table 3: Rural and urban compared to all respondents

	All BIPOC respondents (n= 321)	Rural BIPOC respondents (n= 55)	Urban BIPOC respondents (n= 88)
Have you heard about clean energy?	Yes, and I understand what it means: 54%	Yes, but I’m not sure what it means: 50%	Yes, and I understand what it means: 47%
Where did you hear about clean energy?	Top answer tied: Local news and national news: 21%	Top answer: Local news: 27%	Top answer: National news: 26%
How often do you think about clean energy?	Top answer: A few times a month: 19%	Top answer: Never: 22%	Top answer: Multiple times a week: 19%
Top three modes of clean energy	Top three: Solar, wind, hydro	Top three: Solar, wind, geothermal	Top three: Sun, wind, hydro
I feel my voice is important to the clean energy conversation	Top answer tied: Agreed and neither agree nor disagree tied: 35%	Top answer: Agree: 40%	Top answer: Agree: 41%
Clean energy initiatives will bring jobs to my neighborhood	Top answer: Neither agree nor disagree: 40%	Top answer: Neither agree nor disagree: 45%	Top answer: Agree: 44%

²⁶See Appendix C



BIPOC Youth

Born between 1997-2012, Generation Z (Gen Z or Zoomers) are a coveted demographic for the professionals we interviewed who are looking to build capacity and enact change around clean energy. This generation is aging into a strong electorate with approximately 41 million members of Gen Z eligible to vote in the 2024 Presidential election.²⁷

According to our younger survey participants (n=33),²⁸ there are a lot of opportunities to communicate with BIPOC members of Gen Z that differ from older generations.

Similar to rural participants, Gen Z has clean energy awareness, but limited understanding (48% said they knew and understood, and 45% said they knew but were unsure what it means). Most have heard about clean energy from an educator (30%) and the top two media for that information was an in-person presentation, lecture or sermon (21%), or social media (21%).



30%
Educators



21%
Lecture or Sermon



21%
Social Media

Given that Gen Z is often thought of as digital natives,²⁹ 58% of Gen Z survey participants highlighted that social media is the preferred way to communicate, especially YouTube (67%), Instagram (45%), and TikTok (24%). Other modes of communication included TV news (especially local). Gen Z is a great opportunity to engage activists or advocates with 30% indicating that they would like to hear from this source. They are looking for the message and spokesperson to clearly communicate and be trustworthy, smart, confident, and working in clean energy.



²⁷Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/41-million-members-gen-z-will-be-eligible-vote-2024>
²⁸Our survey was only distributed to self-identified adults (18+). For this section, we will be looking at participants who identify as 18-24 years old at the time of survey completion. For the purpose of this study, we will be using the term Gen. Z even though our Gen. Z specific reporting does not include 12-17 and 25-27 year olds.
²⁹Retrieved on 20 March 2024 from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>

Insights from Professionals

In addition to hearing from community members via our survey, we wanted to learn more from clean energy professionals about their challenges, opportunities, and communication and outreach strategies.

Key takeaways from the professionals putting in the time and energy included:

Feedback

When it comes to BIPOC engagement, leadership and staff must intentionally center these voices to avoid erasing groups and communities.

From the Interviews

“I think formally and in written form, I would say no.³⁰ But informally and personally, yes. Because I’m sensitive to that. And others around me are sensitive to that. So I think we [coworkers] are more intentional because of that... So when we choose where we locate a public forum, we are more intentional about, you know, ‘Hey, let’s do this in this particular community park. You know, a [references a predominantly Black neighborhood] versus a [references predominantly white neighborhood].”

Takeaway

Some participants struggled to convey what work was happening to engage and communicate with BIPOC communities, with some even admitting that it’s not happening or it wasn’t a central goal of the campaign. Regardless of how large or engaged the community is, intentionality is critical for creating an inclusive campaign. One of the professionals (a Black woman working at a predominately white corporation) said that, although conscientious work in Black and Brown communities was not happening on an organizational level at her corporation, she was working with fellow BIPOC practitioners to ensure those communities were not missed.

Feedback

One of the most important things a professional can do is show up and meet people where they are. This builds trust.

From the Interviews

“But when they [the local town my company was partnering with] were trying to develop their ways of how they were going to get the word out about different things, I told him, ‘Hey, you got to go to the community meetings. You have to go knock on some doors. You have to show up in ways that’s not just for what you are looking to spread into the community. So when [a name of neighborhood] is having a Halloween program, you come around to that, you engage the family and the kids. So that when you do come back around and do your stuff, you don’t seem like an outsider.”

Takeaway

The process of doing community engagement takes a lot of time, energy, and resources. Professionals talked at length about engaging communities for months before starting their campaigns, and years for actually moving the needle. Some professionals even acknowledged that they completely missed what was actually the issue or important to a community until they got there and began the relationship-building process.

Feedback

Show me, don’t tell me: positive impact.

From the Interviews

“[It’s important to help] people understand the impact that they get to have. Because in my experience and my behavioral science knowledge, people want to matter to their communities, to the work that they do, [and] people don’t want to be doing endless work. And, so, a lot of what we’ve been doing in this project is helping folks who may not see themselves as connected in a certain way in this industry [and] understand how vital and important they are, and why they matter as a piece of the ecosystem.”

Takeaway

Many players — activists, advocates, teachers, concerned citizens, nonprofits, for profits, policy makers — put in a lot of work to make legislation or initiatives happen. It’s important to recognize how small actions can create a positive impact. Celebrating the process of progress is a way to inspire and keep people engaged.

Feedback

Few talked about the news media and many addressed that they struggled with social media (unless there was a designated manager).

From the Interviews

“The easy one is the owned media; strategies like that are the ones people always reach for, but I feel like the earned media has helped us a lot more. Getting [the media] to talk about us, that carries a lot more weight — in my opinion — than me talking about ourselves. Getting in publications, getting in Black-owned journalism, and getting in, you know, more rural papers and local media outlets and stuff like that.”

From the Interviews

“I can tell you that social media is part of the work, I don’t think we have seen social media [at my organization] super implemented well. But I will say I’ve been in spaces that historically, even having a really nice website that looks like it was made in this year is something you don’t see a lot. I hate to be super critical about it. I think, in general, green organizations are slower when it comes to the future.³¹ I often feel like social media is often used as a way of bulletin board would be [in the past]. You slap a post up and you hope people see it. In general there’s this timeline blindness where if I see something that was obviously made on Canva, I’m not for sure if I’m going to look at it. So that’s been my experience. I think there’s not enough different people in the room who really engages with social media on a level of figuring out human-based campaigns. I think it is very much, ‘Oh, crap, people use social media, we should probably post something.’ But that’s been my experience, just from looking at the places I’ve been, it’s not used efficiently.”

Takeaway

Our survey research underscores: Money and resources must be earmarked for social media and media relations. Community members want to learn about issues from social media and local news. Hiring a communication professional or firm will help you research, plan, implement and evaluate how well your message is being received and if goals are being met.



³⁰The interviewee is suggesting there are no internal conversations about engaging diverse communities

³¹Implying technology



Feedback

The lived experiences of the professionals matter.

From the Interviews

“I think, honestly, one of the things that we struggle with is our lived experience [and] our staff’s lived experience. For the most part, we’re a pretty white organization, which is limiting in what I feel like we really have authority to talk about in some ways.”

Takeaway

Workers of color are underrepresented in the clean energy sector,³² so it’s no surprise that communicating to communities of color about the benefits of clean energy has room for improvement. The lived experience of professionals working in, or adjacent to, clean energy is critical to building relationships, gaining trust, and creating culturally specific and sensitive materials. Besides an intentional and equitable hiring campaign, very white organizations should consider building partnerships with organizations and consultants to deepen the diverse lived experiences of staff. Additionally, dedicating time and resources to educating white organizational leaders to be culturally sensitive, relevant, and appropriate will go a long way.

Feedback

Consider your audience and keep it simple.

From the Interviews

“...Really thinking deeply about that and thinking about our non-native English speakers, or folks that need purely plain language in order to engage, right? The energy system loves some acronyms. I can throw around acronyms all day. But that’s not helpful, for people to be a part of our industry, to understand our messaging, [they need to] understand the importance of the work that we do.”

Takeaway

When communicating with the communities you’re trying to reach, professionals must ensure to make their materials accessible to everyone. Professionals should translate industry or academic jargon into more accessible, simple terms.

From U.S. to us: Communicating global and national issues and making them relevant to individuals and communities

The survey findings suggest a few things, the most evident being that there is a disconnect between recognizing that clean energy should be a priority nationally and internationally, but feeling neutral regarding clean energy in one’s community or neighborhood. This provides an opportunity for communicators to reconsider their communication strategies.

During our interviews with clean energy professionals, many acknowledged that these are challenges they are trying to bridge. To do so, there are some key strategies clean energy professionals point to to re-engage community members and help them feel like an empowered and critical part of the conversation.

For clean energy professionals

The professionals who spoke most passionately about community engagement were most likely to point to the power of conversation as the preferred mode of communication over one-way communication strategies. While all acknowledged that there was a time and place for emails, newsletters, and websites; the professionals working to change attitudes and behaviors of communities emphasized the importance of going to and being a part of those communities.

Strategy: Show up in spaces unrelated to your goal. This helps practitioners better understand that community’s culture and indicates that you aren’t only there for yourself.

Tactics:

- Look at community calendars (e.g., parades, block parties, gallery openings)
- Attend community meetings and town halls
- Consider one-on-one relationship building. Sit on porches and be in community with individuals.

Keep in mind: If you’re looking to engage with youth, survey data suggests that Gen Z wants to build these personal relationships.



³²E2, Alliance, AABE, EEFA, BOSS. (2021). *Help wanted: Diversity in clean energy* [White paper].

Strategy: Prioritize the comfort, ease, and accessibility of communities you're trying to reach.

Tactics:

- When you're event planning — from large conferences to smaller, more intimate conversations — rent space that's familiar and comfortable to your target audience. Avoid convention centers or meeting rooms in hotels and opt for community centers, parks, or schools.
- The strongest voices in the room should always be biased towards community members. Make sure there are more community voices present than corporate or policy voices.
- Consider accessibility:
 - Mobility: Provide large, comfortable chairs for a variety of body sizes and wheelchair accessibility,
 - Transportation: Is it on a public transportation line or have free parking? Consider making a deal with and paying a manager of a close-by garage or lot.
 - Language: What are the top languages spoken in the community? Having an available Spanish or Mandarin speaker or ASL interpreter indicates that all perspectives are welcomed and encouraged.
 - Literacy: Ensure that presentation materials (slides, takeaways) are expressed in a way that is easy to understand. Avoid jargon and complex topics. AI is a great tool for taking hard-to-understand language and simplifying it
 - Technology: Can audience members contribute in ways that feel empowering and comfortable? Consider having digital, handwritten, vocal, and post-event ways to give feedback.

Keep in mind: Survey participants are looking for opportunities to engage in person, whether that's through in-person presentations or one-on-one conversations. Removing as many barriers as possible is critical for getting these conversations going.



Strategy: Build coalitions and create meaningful partnerships.

Tactics:

- Partner with local businesses and community groups
- Hire leaders from communities to help you organize
- Schedule and organize gatherings in trusted, familiar community spaces

Keep in mind: Find long standing coalitions with similar goals in the community you are trying to reach.



Strategy: Lean into your lived experience.

Tactics:

- Build trust by establishing shared experience, which leads to in-group membership.³³ Culture, language, and networks can be leveraged to humanize yourself.
- Lean into your unique perspective to advocate for communities in your organization and associations. If you find you are a minority in your organization, find affinity groups (formally or informally) to build power and work to center underrepresented voices, groups, and issues.
- Don't be afraid of the differences between you and your target community. Identifying differences and acknowledging your room for growth will allow your target community to feel more comfortable sharing insider knowledge with you.

Keep in mind: Trust is the most important characteristic of a clean energy spokesperson. A meta-analysis of trust research suggests there are several key factors that go into building trust.³⁴ The contextual (shared) factors, especially in the collaboration category, include things such as in-group membership, duration of collaboration, communication, and team cohesion.

When looking at the factors identified as critical for the trustee, these include ability-based such as expertise and reliability, and characteristics such as culture, reputation, and adaptability. Many of these amount to your lived experience and how you show up in spaces.

³³R Hancock, P. A., Kessler, T. T., Kaplan, A. D., Stowers, K., Brill, J. C., Billings, D. R., Schaefer, K. E., & Szalma, J. L. (2023). How and why humans trust: A meta-analysis and elaborated model. *Frontiers in psychology*, 14, 1081086. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1081086>
³⁴Ibid.

For clean energy professionals

Communication professionals working internally at clean energy organizations, or the firms and freelancers hired externally to support, should lean into their strategic communication toolkit while considering the suggested strategies above.

Strategy: Leverage owned media, which includes websites, newsletters, blogs, etc.

Tactics:

- Design a clean and accessible landing page — user-friendly to a variety of audiences
- Develop an organizational brand guide that includes fonts, colors, logos, taglines, hashtags, etc.
- Establish uniformity across platforms — consider brand standards across social media, websites, and traditional media
- Encourage a culture of advocacy within your staff — your staff and stakeholders (e.g., board, volunteers, advocates) are some of the best representatives of your brand

Keep in mind: Survey respondents want to hear from clean energy professionals. Making sure your owned media is easy to read and informative will help you establish rapport and credibility. And don't forget, engaging your internal stakeholders is a great way to connect with the communities you seek to serve.



Strategy: Prioritize media relations as a communication strategy.

Tactics:

- Build relationships with local reporters, especially TV
- Craft newsworthy releases and alerts — TV is a great medium for human interest stories and print media is a reliable source for sharing information
- Identify key spokespeople and center BIPOC voices as experts — keep those same spokespeople for the entirety of the campaign. This helps build credibility, reliability, and reinforces a positive reputation

Keep in mind: Across the survey, participants identified that local news was the preferred medium for learning about clean energy. Given there is an opportunity to increase buy-in at the community level, building relationships with print, TV, radio, and reputable bloggers will deliver your message to a wider audience.

Strategy: Build a social media plan with a focus on video.

Tactics:

- Share news stories on social media platforms. While most platforms are prioritizing video (e.g., TV segments), consider sharing written articles on Facebook and Instagram
- Prioritize your YouTube account and other forms of video — consider videos that gratify diverse motivations:
 - Awareness and understanding: learning more about a clean energy topic
 - Humanizing the issue: introducing clean energy professionals or addressing how individuals can implement clean energy practices into their daily lives (this one is great for Gen Z!)
 - Include a call-to-action
- Build Facebook groups and establish a virtual presence for people to find community about clean energy news and issues
- Incorporate a range of participants and topics that genuinely reflect your audience's experiences
- Regarding frequency of posts, check analytics and understand your audience

Keep in mind: Participants want to hear stories from people benefitting from and working in clean energy. Important to the message is the source, and participants are looking for messages that invoke a degree of trustworthiness, expertise and proximity (i.e., working in clean energy), and strong communication skills.

Strategy: Don't lose sight of localized community engagement, even if your organization is working primarily in policy.

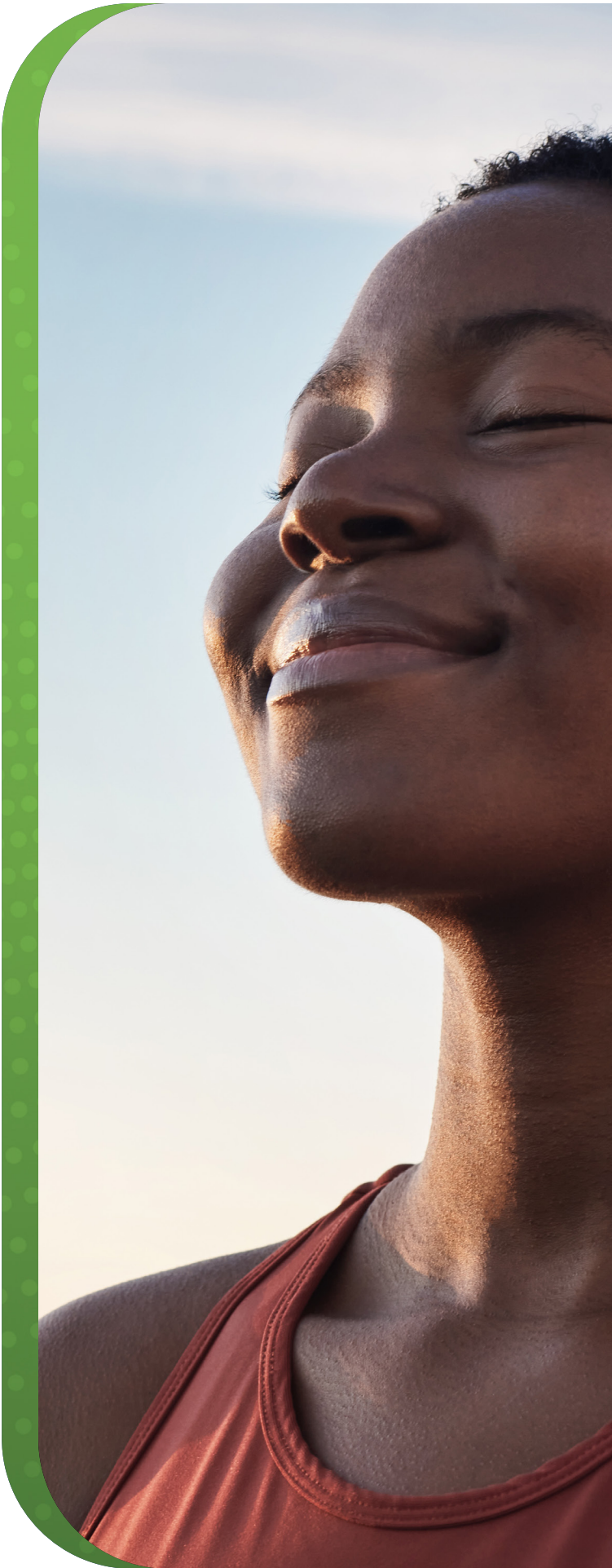
Tactics:

- Identify community members to speak to policymakers about how energy issues affect them and their families; be intentional about centering BIPOC voices
- Understand that your top priority might not be the top priority of the communities most directly affected — show up, put in the time, and listen more than you speak
- Build coalitions to generate capacity and power — hire and pay community leaders to be your voice, show up for more than your organizational goal and purpose
- Be aware of language — be culturally sensitive, avoid jargon, ensure documents are translated and accessible to non-English language communicators
- Use social and news media to reconnect policy wins or losses back to the community
-

Keep in mind: Policies can seem nebulous and abstract to people not working in politics. Drawing the connection to people's everyday lives is an important step to ensuring people care about policy on a local level.

Conclusion

The need for conversations about clean energy to be inclusive and equitable can’t be overstated. Effective communication strategies and tactics tailored to BIPOC communities are important to ensure their engagement, trust, and active participation in shaping a sustainable future for all. When we focus our efforts on more proactive communication with people of color, we are not only moving towards a cleaner planet, but we’re also building stronger, more united communities.



Appendix

Appendix A: Interview participants

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Self-disclosed demographic information	Position	Type of organization
Grace	she/they	Did not disclose	Program manager	Advocacy, nonprofit
Sebastian	he/him	White, married, gay, middle class, able bodied, cis-male with master’s level education	Communications, Coordinator	Advocacy, nonprofit
Jackie	she/her	I am White, straight, Jewish, middle class	Communications, Leadership	Advocacy, nonprofit
Hadija	she/her/hers	African American	Community engagement, Manager	Service provider
Valerie	she/her	Did not disclose	Leadership	Advocacy, nonprofit
Sutton	she/her	Did not disclose	Communications, Leadership	Advocacy, nonprofit
Rock	Did not disclose	Did not disclose	C-Suite	Service provider
Ever	she/her	Did not disclose	Program manager	Advocacy, nonprofit
Nissim	her/she	I live in a city where coal ash is being retrieved and dumped at a landfill not far from where I live.	Consultant	Consultant
Risa	she/her	Did not disclose	Community engagement, Leadership	Advocacy, nonprofit
Onesimus	he/him	African-American male	C-Suite	Service provider

Appendix

Appendix B: Survey Demographics

Race	American Indian or Alaska Native	4%
	Asian or Asian American	25%
	Black or African American	54%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	2%
	Two or more races	15%
Identify as Hispanic or Latine	No	81%
	Yes	19%
Gender (self-identified)	Female (female, CIS female, female with masc.)	47%
	Male	32%
	Woman	2%
	Man	1%
	Trans (transgender male, trans)	0.6%
	Singular identifications (e.g., lovely lady, mix, none, straight)	17%
State	Alabama	8%
	Florida	32%
	Georgia	21%
	Mississippi	5%
	None of the above	3%
	North Carolina	17%
	South Carolina	5%
	Tennessee	9%

Appendix

Appendix B: Survey Demographics

Community	Rural	17%
	Suburban	55%
	Urban	27%
Age	18-24	10%
	25-34	20%
	35-44	23%
	45-54	26%
	55-64	13%
	65-74	6%
	75-84	2%
Income	85+	0%
	Over \$150,000	9%
	Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	12%
	Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	12%
	Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	19%
	Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	16%
	Between \$15,000 and \$29,999	19%
	Under \$15,000	14%

Appendix

Appendix C: Media Audit

We conducted a media audit to determine how conversations are formed in the media on the topic of clean energy. We focused on outlets based in the Southeast and noted our key findings from sample stories.

KEY FINDINGS

- Newspapers, even on the local level, tend to focus on high-level issues and stats/facts
 - Newspaper outlets that target more diverse communities focus on the effects of marginalized communities' lack of access to resources
- Broadcast/TV provides more info and updates that could directly affect people locally; feel-good stories; human interest stories
 - More conversations about specific aspects of clean energy instead of clean energy in general
 - More political undertones
- Magazines and blogs focus on specific initiatives and the stories behind them

Outlet Type	Publication	State	Sample Articles/Stories
Newspapers	The Atlanta Journal-Constitution	GA	Georgia, Southeast among the most at-risk from climate change
	Memphis Flyer	TN	Climate Change Action Moves Ahead Across Tennessee
	Savannah Morning News	GA	Gulfstream looks to sun to power Savannah research campus
	Florida International University News	FL	Too often left unsaid: the connection between climate change and health
	The Atlanta Voice	GA	25% of Americans live with polluted air, with people of color and Western states disproportionately affected, report says
	Charleston City Paper	SC	S.C. sees \$2.5B in climate damage over 3 years, new report says
Broadcast	WVLT	TN	Oak Ridge DOE partnership means radioactive material will be recycled for clean energy
	WSAV News 3	GA	Georgia's Solar Renaissance ignites a clean energy transformation in 2023 WSAV-TV
	ABC 33/40	AL	Town Hall: Powering Alabama Forward
	WRAL	NC	NC leaders hold conference to discuss future of wind energy
Magazines & Blogs	Gulf & Main Magazine	FL	Pathways Alliance advances key oil sands CO2 emissions reduction activities
	Decaturish	GA	DeKalb County partners with Goodwill on rental, utility assistance program - Decaturish

Appendix

Appendix D: Social Media Audit

We conducted a social media audit to examine platforms on the topic of clean energy. We focused on national and local pages, groups, and campaigns. Our key findings are below.

KEY FINDINGS

- 61.4% of the world's population uses social media — 4.95 billion people.
- Breakdown of Social Media usage by age.
- Social Media time on platform by age.
- Successful Social Media Campaigns.
- Highest reach for diverse audiences.

Social Media Usage by age:
Millennials (Age: 27 - 42) - 68.5 Million users
Gen Z (Age: 11 - 26) - 56.4 Million Users
Gen X (Age: 43 - 58) - 51.8 Million Users
Baby Boomers (Age: 59 - 77) - 36.9 Million users
Social Media time on platform by age:
Facebook:
Overall 30.9 minutes per day
29% 30-39 years old
29% 50 - 64 years old
Instagram:
Overall 33.1 minutes per day
30.8% 18 - 29 years old
30.3% 25 - 34 years old
X/Twitter
Overall 34.1 minutes per day
28.35% 18 - 24 years old
29.63% 25 - 34 years old
17.96% 35 - 44 years old
Tiktok:
Overall 53.8 minutes per day
37.3% 18 - 24 years old
32.9% 25 - 34 years old
Best social site for teens:
Instagram
Snapchat
Best social site for millennials:
Facebook
Instagram
Best place to reach a male audience:
Youtube
The most engaging type of video regarding clean energy are:
Short form video (30 seconds or less)

Appendix

Appendix D: Social Media Audit

Overall campaign breakdown:
Sustainable Energy For All: thisiscool.seforall.org/
Successful social media campaigns around clean/green energy based on their numbers:
BMO podcast (award-winning) (140 episodes) https://sustainabilityleaders.bmo.com/en/home/sustainability-leaders-podcast/
National Grid: Responsibility Calls
Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet energyalliance.org/campaign
Popular Clean Energy pages on Facebook, Instagram, X, Tiktok, & Youtube were:
Media
Engineering
Power Companies
Influencers
Hashtags:
#CleanEnergy
#GreenEnergy
#SaveThePlanet
#EcoFriendly
#LetsChangeEnergy
Highest reach for diverse audiences included:
Utilizing the platforms’ different strengths such as:
Facebook: Conversations, data, & older audiences.
Instagram: Influencers, photo data, & younger audiences.
X: Highest reach using amplified engagement.
Tiktok: Trends, collaborations, & authentic stories.
Youtube: Highest platform for educational outreach. Audiences actively searched out Youtube for answers. Finding authentic stories and storytelling.
Staying away from formal/corporate
Using visuals to aid audience’s understanding
Example: campaign used filters allowing audience to visualize how a scene could appear
Making sure language matched region/community
Understanding the algorithm changes in order to promote.
Using “out-of-the-box” ideas such as campaign specific photo filters, dynamic influencers, and impactful numbers saw best results.



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