

#Break
Free
From
Plastic

GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS:

Reporting on



GREEN- WASHING & FALSE SOLUTIONS to Plastic Pollution

Intro

Historically and at present, much journalistic coverage and media about plastic and plastic pollution have — however intentionally or unintentionally — spread industry misinformation designed to deceive the public about the gravity of what has become a global ecological crisis in order to continue their business as usual.

This guide shows journalists and the media why plastic pollution misinformation is so dangerous, and how to identify it; and shares solutions-oriented tips to make your reporting on plastic pollution both truthful and impactful.

Why does it matter?

Plastic and petrochemical industry messaging introduces bias into journalistic works and other media. This worryingly shifts the focus of stories away from truth-tellers on the frontlines of the plastic pollution crisis and the real solutions we need, to false and unproven industry-backed solutions and unfounded public blame for pollution—despite the clear fact that industries' continued mass production of plastic is the cause of plastic pollution.

When equipped with the truth about plastic pollution and tools to craft effective solutions-oriented stories, journalists and the media can help shift the narrative and correct the record on this most important issue.

That's what this guide is designed to help you do.

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- How to tell if it's greenwashing
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What is greenwashing?

Plastic pollution is an urgent global crisis. Plastics are full of toxicants. They never biodegrade but instead break up into microplastics that pollute the air, outer space, oceans, freshwaters, lands and soils, plants, and animals' bodies—including humans. Made of fossil fuels and requiring significant amounts of energy to produce and ship, plastic is also a huge source of climate-warming carbon emissions. Plastic drives environmental injustice around the world.

Despite scientists having identified an urgent need for industries to stop making plastics and other toxic man-made substances, the plastic and petrochemical industries are now on track to churn out more plastic than ever before. [1]

Of course, stopping plastic production would be catastrophic for billionaire corporations' bottom lines. One tactic they use to stay in business is "greenwashing," or the "practice of falsifying or overstating the green credentials of a product, service or brand." [2] Greenwashing helps delay, distract, and derail society from real solutions to plastic pollution and the climate crisis [3]—often with quick fixes rather than necessary structural change to reduce or prevent waste. False solutions perpetuated by the plastic and petrochemical industries' greenwashing promotes pollution and injustice, and enables continued production of plastic and petrochemicals—exactly the opposite of what our world needs. [4]

Examples of false solutions that have been commonly greenwashed by companies, governments, and the media include: bio-based, biodegradable, compostable plastics (which require infrastructure and specific conditions to actually be compostable;

and are likely to still contain conventional fossil-fuel based plastics and/or toxic additives) [5]; "chemical recycling" or "advanced recycling;" incineration; oxo-degradable plastics; plastic credits; and plastic-to-fuel technologies. [6] These proposed solutions to plastic pollution perpetuate the throw-away economy, and do not minimise plastic production and plastic waste generation at the source.

Genuine solutions to plastic pollution contribute to the reduction of plastic pollution and do not perpetuate throw-away, single-use consumerism. Instead, solutions shall focus on zero-waste approaches that promote reduction, reuse, refill, and redesign of products and delivery systems to refrain from generating more wastes. And while solutions shall be based on environmental justice, they equally promote the welfare of people—minimising harm and ensuring justice, equity, and well-being.

Greenwashing is the practice of falsifying or overstating the green credentials of a product, service or brand which then delays, distracts, and derails society from enacting real solutions to plastic pollution and the climate crisis [7] which include addressing pollution at source — reduction in plastic production, zero waste approaches, and a shift from throw-away culture by promoting reuse systems. Greenwashing is commonly used by companies in advertising and public messaging to seem more environmentally sustainable and climate-friendly than they actually are. Such statements may reference specific products or services, or company attributes including its activities, plans, or goals in the form of 'corporate reputational' or 'brand' advertising. [8]

[1] Geyer, R., et al. 2017. Production, use and fate of all plastics ever made. Science. <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.1700782>

[2] Greenwash.com. 2022. Changing Markets Foundation. <https://greenwash.com/>

[3] Talking Trash. 2020. Changing Markets Foundation. <https://talking-trash.com/>

[4] False Solution Tool. 2021. Trash Hero. <https://trashhero.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/THW-False-Solution-Tool-Final.pdf>

[5] Zimmerman, L., et al. 2020. Are bioplastics and plant-based materials safer than conventional plastics? In vitro toxicity and chemical composition. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412020320213>

[6] Plastic Solutions Review. 2022. Break Free From Plastic. <https://plasticsolutionsreview.com/>

[7] Greenwash.com. 2022. Changing Markets Foundation. <https://greenwash.com/>

[8] ClientEarth. 2022. Plastics on trial: a briefing series on evolving liability risks related to plastics. Brief 1: greenwashing.

How to tell if it's greenwashing

Trash Hero has created a flow-chart tool to help you identify whether or not a solution you've encountered could be greenwashing.

Click the link

[Trash Hero False Solution Tool](#)

Greenwashing: Case studies and examples

The plastic and petrochemical industries have managed to largely portray lethal plastic and false solutions to plastic pollution as useful, safe, and even low-carbon in order to continue making and selling heaps of plastic stuff to reap massive profits. Here are a few examples of what greenwashing looks like in practice, with case studies from three large corporations:

Click the links

[Coca-Cola](#)

[TerraCycle](#)

[Ikea](#)

Learn more from Client Earth's "Plastics on trial" briefing series on the evolving liability risks related to plastics greenwashing:

[Client Earth](#)

Dos When working on a story



1. Identify key sources/stakeholders and their roles in your story. These include stakeholders who are harmed by plastic pollution, are trying to end plastic pollution, or are perpetuating or enabling plastic pollution.

Frontline voices:

- Environmental justice communities
- Waste pickers
- Community scientists
- Waste workers
- Street vendors

Communities and organisations:

- Break Free From Plastic
- Plastic Pollution Coalition
- Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)
- Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL)
- Beyond Plastics
- Local civic and community organisations focused on zero-waste solutions to plastic pollution

Local governments:

- Tribal councils
- City, town, and other municipal councils and committees

Larger governing bodies

- Regional
- State
- National
- International

Industries and corporations enabling petrochemical and plastics production:

- Warehousing (logistics)
- Transportation
- Injection and molding
- Equipment suppliers
- Fast-moving consumer goods companies

Waste-related businesses:

- Barges and by-water shipping
- Trucking
- Railways
- Landfills
- Incinerators
- "Advanced recycling" corporations
- Recyclers
- Fossil fuel waste dumps
- Illegal dumps
- Junk shops

Businesses:

- Stocking and selling plastic or plastic-packaged products

Investors:

- Public stock trades
- Private investments
- Real Estate Investment Funds and Trusts (REIFs and REITs)
- Municipal and private retirement funds
- Bank investments

Systems:

- Society
- Environment
- Governance
- Economy
- Information



2. Be on the lookout for greenwashing from the following types of sources, which have a track record for misleading journalists and the public with their messaging:

Organisations and companies that:

- Focus on cleanups and disregard efforts that work to end continued production of plastic.
- Claim to make products from “ocean-bound plastic.”
- Focus on recycling plastic as *the ultimate solution to plastic pollution* rather than focusing on eliminating unnecessary plastics from products and practices such as flexible, multilayer plastic packaging or sachets among others.

Consultants that:

- Frame economic gain from plastics, petrochemical, fossil fuel, or supporting industries as “positive,” rather than account for the full range of damaging effects caused by the existence and operation of these industries.
- Focus the responsibility of addressing plastic pollution on the consumer instead of addressing plastic pollution from the root of the problem—plastic production issue, over which corporations and governments have a role to play.

Alliances that:

- Are founded, run, or funded by the plastics, petrochemical, fossil fuel, or supporting industries.

Lawyers that:

- Have represented clients in the plastics, petrochemical, fossil fuel, or supporting industries.

Academics that:

- Currently or have previously worked for industries producing plastics, petrochemicals, or fossil fuels.
- Work or have worked for, study or have studied at universities with programs or departments funded by industries producing plastics, petrochemicals, or fossil fuels.
- Currently or have previously worked for businesses or organisations that engage in practices outlined above.

Enforcement agencies that:

- Have been found to inadequately regulate and enforce legislation designed to regulate the plastics, petrochemical, fossil fuel, or supporting industries.
- Have track records for fast-tracking permits of plastics, petrochemical, fossil fuel, or supporting industries' polluting infrastructure and operations.



3. Ask these interview questions when presented with potential solutions

When you're reporting on plastic pollution, remain sceptical of solutions that are not well established as real. If you find yourself talking to someone proposing a solution to address plastic pollution, we suggest incorporating some of the following questions into your interview to best portray how realistically it actually addresses plastic pollution and to further reveal potential greenwashing:

- Does your solution require release of pollution into human communities or the environment?
- Does your solution release toxins into the environment that are linked to health issues such as cancer and asthma?
- Do corporations, governments, or investors benefit financially from your solution?
- Who is funding your solution, and how are they related to the plastic or petrochemical industries?
- How does your solution address the need to significantly curb plastics production in order to protect human and environmental health?
- Does this solution stop or reduce the production of plastics?
- Is this an upstream solution or an end-of-pipe intervention focused on waste management, disposal, and recovery?
- Are there published studies and evidence proving that this proposed solution works? Who funded those studies?

Don'ts

1

Avoid pulling language from petrochemical and plastic industry press releases, and avoid relying on industry public relations officers as primary sources—instead of balancing stories, they are often sources of misinformation that can create harmful imbalances.

2

Similarly, avoid pulling language from industry websites, which are full of greenwashing as well as “forward-facing” statements designed to please investors and mislead the public but have no substantiation.

3

Don't automatically assume businesses and organisations that appear concerned about plastic pollution are solutions-oriented; they are also susceptible to greenwashing and some continue to push false solutions that hinder real solutions.

More solutions-oriented plastic pollution journalism tips

1



Incorporate and centre frontline voices in your work

Waste pickers, environmental justice communities, community scientists, waste workers, street vendors

2

When producing media about plastic pollution's impacts, make clear its full range of serious effects on human health, social justice, the environment, climate, and wildlife



3

Be aware that sharing false solutions can cause serious harm; be careful with the sweeping sounding technological fixes that are portrayed as coming to save us

4

Understand that without systemic change, there cannot be systemic solutions

5



Understand the **complex history** of the plastic and petrochemical industries, and understand them as being intertwined with and drivers of racism, colonialism, and violence

6



Avoid **perpetuating industry narratives** and avoid giving a spotlight, however speculative, to false solutions

7



Focus on **amplifying stories about real solutions**, especially those that are systemic and that address plastic pollution at the source such as reduction, redesign, reuse, refill, and other zero waste approaches

8



Seek out solutions that are accessible, just, and equitable, serving local needs without causing harm to people or the planet

9



When prioritising solutions, think about the "circular strategy hierarchy," which recommends reduction of plastics and reuse of nontoxic materials over plastics recycling—which does not actually address the issue of plastic production and has demonstrated a poor track record globally, and is a form of waste colonialism

10



When single-use replacements for plastic are proposed, materials should be closely vetted to determine whether they are truly nontoxic and benign (be aware that many so-called "bioplastics" contain the same hazardous chemicals found in conventional plastics)

11

When talking about recycling, acknowledge both its role and its limitations. No more than 9% of plastics are being recycled and plastics cannot be infinitely recycled considering its inherent toxicity which remains a harm to end users and recycling workers. While transitioning away from plastics must be urgent, a just transition into reuse and zero waste systems must ensure no one gets left behind—taking into account waste pickers and all workers whose livelihoods may be impacted when recycling and other jobs relevant to plastic production, distribution, and management, are transformed into green jobs.



Examples of solutions-oriented plastic pollution journalism

Click the links:



- [The plastic trap](#) by Erica Cirino
- [The what, why and how of a plastic waste brand audit](#) by Pinky Chandran, Dr. Umashankar, and Nalini Shekar with inputs from Nirmala Shekar, Beula Anthony and Bianca Fernandes from Hasiru Dala
- [Inside the industry push to label your yogurt cup 'recyclable'](#) by Joseph Winters
- [Ordering in? Your food delivery may contain toxic chemicals from plastic packs](#) by Tarra Quismundo
- [From waste to furniture: Philippines upcycles its way out of its plastic pollution crisis](#) by Job Manahan
- ['Look at the bigger picture': Environmentalists, experts warn possible health risks in plastic upcycling as initiative booms](#) by Job Manahan
- [Trash endgame: Can recycling solve PH's plastic woes?](#) by Job Manahan
- [TIPS: How to make your household environment-friendly, plastics-free](#) by Job Manahan
- [How a plastics ban turned Siquijor into a zero-waste island in the Philippines](#) by Geela Garcia
- [Inside Zero Waste Efforts in Countries Overwhelmed With Trash](#) by Therese Reyes
- [Managing Pandemic Trash](#) by Tarra Quismundo
- [How have countries stopped burning garbage?](#) by Nhu Tran
- ['Waste colonialism is big corp making consumers pay for its plastic waste'](#) by Hannah Fernandez
- [Was steckt da wirklich drin?](#) by Sebastian Kempkens, Christian Salewski, Greta Taubert

Resources

Click the links:



- [Plastic Solutions Review](#), a Microsite that provides clear information about proposed solutions (real and false) to plastic pollution, with insight from scientific experts
- [Solutions Journalism Network](#), a network that works with journalists and news organisations to make connections and produce media that "investigates and explains, in a critical and clear-eyed way, how people try to solve widely shared problems,"^[10] with useful tools such as its [Solutions Story Tracker](#) and [Learning Lab](#)
- [Changing Markets Foundation's Talking Trash Report and Microsite](#), an excellent resource on greenwashing tactics employed by the plastic and petrochemical industries
- [False Solutions Tool](#) by Trash Hero, a flow-chart to help you discern whether a solution to plastic pollution is real or false and potentially greenwashed
- [Plastic Pollution Coalition's Solutions webpage](#), which is full of information about key systemic solutions necessary to stop plastic pollution
- [What is Greenwashing?](#) - Learn more about greenwashing and how to challenge it from ClientEarth's body of work

[10] Solutions Journalism: What Is It And Why Should I Care? 2020. <https://thewholestory.solutionsjournalism.org/solutions-journalism-what-is-it-and-why-should-i-care-e5acd0ab5332>

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