



**Framing Climate Crisis:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of Climate Change Narratives in Pakistani English Newspapers**

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Abstract:

Climate change represents a serious and growing threat to developing nations, especially Pakistan, where extreme weather events have become very frequent and disruptive. This paper examines the ways in which the editorials of the Pakistani English-language newspapers framed recent climate-related incidents in May 2025, when the country experienced a series of severe hailstorms and unusual weather patterns in major cities. The study employs a qualitative analysis of four editorials published in Dawn, The Nation, Islamabad Post, and Pakistan Today, informed by framing theory and guided by Fairclough's three dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The discussion of how responsibility and causality are presented is based on the analysis of lexical choices, metaphorical constructions, agency assignment and discursive silences. The findings show that the selection of framing is very diverse and that in general, it leans towards framing vague or passive constructions that blur institutional accountability. Moreover, the issue of climate justice and social inequity remains minor, and vulnerable groups and structural conditions are not considered seriously. The analysis shows that editorials serve as powerful ideological sources that influence the public perception of climate crises. It emphasizes the necessity of having more responsible and justice-oriented editorial discourse in the Pakistani media.

Keywords: Pakistan, Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistani media, climate change, media framing, newspaper editorials, climate justice

INTRODUCTION

Climate change and extreme weather scenario is an experienced, continuous reality in Pakistan. The events in the recent past in cities such as Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Peshawar: such as, unprecedented hailstorms, heavy rains, heat-waves, and devastating winds have made this all too painful. All these irregularities are indicative of a larger trend in the environment that is still developing in power and uncertainty. With nations grappling with these issues, media framing of these events becomes critical particularly with articles that influence the masses and offer solutions

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to these issues. In Pakistan where a response to climate-related problems within an institution usually comes after the damage or occasionally too late, the media narratives play a key role in helping the population to make sense of the situation. Unlike a normal news report, editorials do provide an interpretive approach. They not only inform but also shape how people assign blame, interpret causes, and consider potential solutions. A single editorial can imply whether a climate event is due to governmental negligence, global inequality, or unavoidable natural processes. These framings quietly influence public discourse and, indirectly, policy responses.

In this regard, editorials can be viewed as elite discourse, in that they are intimately read by policymakers, educated, urban masses and institutional actors and they tend to dictate how a national issue ought to be perceived and discussed. In comparison to straight reporting, editorials often go beyond the description of an occurrence in order to judge governance, recommend reforms and influence the expectations of the audience regarding accountability and action.

Despite the fact that a lot of international research has been conducted on the nature of Western media portraying climate change, very little has been given to media discourse in places such as Pakistan. It is especially important since Pakistan is among the ten countries that are the most vulnerable to climate risks. Nevertheless, there is little research on the ways of how newspapers frame and as such, educate the social and political meanings of climatic crises. That gap provides the gap in the knowledge of how the attitudes of the populace and political goodwill are formed in one of the most climate-sensitive areas of the world.

What is more important, a significant part of the current research on climate communication in Pakistan has been inclined to the field of news coverage or broadcast media, whereas the editorial voice, in which newspapers issue explicit judgments and institutional suggestions, is a relatively under researched area. This is important since some accounts (e.g., "unavoidable disaster) are naturalized in editorial discussion and others (e.g., structural inequality, policy neglect, or climate justice) are delegated.

To analyze this, the present study uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to analyze four recent editorials on the topic of extreme weather in Pakistani cities in 2025. The review is based on the works of Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (1998), who both focus on the idea that discourse mirrors and influences power, ideology, and social practice. The Framing Theory is also applicable in interpreting the narrative construction that has been employed in these texts; how certain words, metaphors, or arguments are chosen in order to advance a certain opinion.

This study combines the techniques of CDA and framing, as it will no longer focus on climate editorials as neutral commentaries but rather focus on them as ideological texts that allocate blame, grant certain solutions, and repress other explanations. Specifically, the study is attentive to the extent to which the editorials relate climate events to the climate justice question, particularly, of why Pakistan is disproportionately vulnerable when its emissions are rather low compared to the global average, and whether vulnerable communities are being portrayed as the main stakeholders or not notably at all.

The research asks four key questions: How do editorials explain the causes and effects of these extreme weather events? What language techniques do they use to describe them? How is

responsibility presented, who gets blamed, and who is left out? And finally, how do these narratives align with or push against dominant climate change discourses, both locally and globally?

By addressing these questions, this paper aims to uncover the subtle rhetorical choices that shape how readers come to understand climate change not as a distant scientific issue, but as an immediate, lived crisis. Instead of viewing language as descriptive, the analysis emphasizes that editorial discourse has a tendency to make crisis seem normalized and normal, to avoid institutional responsibility by using passive or vague constructions, or conversely, to reinforce the need to change policy and be prepared to change policy among the general populace. In this regard, the paper adds to the insights into the production of climate meaning in Pakistani English print media and the way in which the meaning can impact the people in their reasoning of responsibility, justice and action.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Climate change is no longer a far-fetched idea, but a reality, especially in places such as Pakistan where environmental disasters have become the order of the day. Although scientific studies are still offering us information about the nature and speed of climate change, it is the media coverage that defines how these problems are perceived by the general population most of the time. Newspaper editorials have their place among the various types of media since they do not merely relay the facts but interpret them, providing explanations, judgments, and even solutions although there is an apparent gap in the academic literature specifically concentrating on their contribution to climate discourse in Pakistan.

The Pakistani context of media research is predominantly focused on straight news coverage or broadcast media, whereas editorial discourse, where the institutional views and ideological stances are most explicitly defined, have received relatively less academic interest. Given that editorials express institutional viewpoints and carry persuasive authority, their potential to shape environmental understanding should not be overlooked. This review focuses on the theoretical and analytical tools guiding the present research—namely media framing theory, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and the concept of climate justice as it appears in contemporary media studies.

Current international research has also highlighted the increased significance of opinion-oriented media texts, as it is argued that editorials are a determining factor in authorizing specific climate discourse and policy agendas, particularly when the world is highly mediated by the discourse of elites (Painter & Ashe, 2012; Schaefer & Schlichting, 2014).

Framing Climate Change in Media

Media frame issues by making some aspects of complex issues more visible, while completely omitting others. The audiences will base their interpretations of causes, responsibility, and solutions on this selective emphasis (Entman, 1993). It is essential in situations where a complex problem is involved like climate change. The way climate events are framed, they may be construed by the readers as a natural occurrence, a policy failure, or, as a result, a social and environmental injustice.

Scholars have shared their views regarding how media coverage affects public understanding of climate change. For instance, Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) showed how attempts to provide

“balanced” reporting sometimes led to propaganda or misinformation, particularly when equal weight was given to both scientific agreement and fringe skepticism. Such framing choices may weaken the perceived urgency of climate action or shift attention away from institutional accountability. The political leanings of media influence how environmental problems are framed (Carvalho, 2007). According to more recent framing research, developing-country media tend to switch between disaster-focused frames and governance-focused frames with potentially major implications on the expectation of responsibility and action among the population (O’Neill et al., 2015; Wozniak, et al, 2021).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Media Language

CDA can be used to look at the way language influences the social reality. The three dimensional model consists of the textual analysis, discursive practice along with the social context (Fairclough, 1995). The framework is applicable in the analysis of construction of meaning at various levels of communication, especially media.

Another study examines how consistent language use influences the way people cognitively establish the world around them. For example, when media continuously depict the environmental problem as “natural”, it draws attention away from decisions, such as lack of planning and poor governance. CDA helps in revealing these patterns and is useful in identifying which actors are held responsible in media discourse. The application of CDA in Pakistani newspapers is still rare, presenting a gap this study aims to address. Recent CDA-related studies on climate also show that nominalization, passivization, as well as metaphors are some of the central discursive strategies used to diffuse responsibility and de-politicize climate crises in media texts (Machin & Mayr, 2012; Stibbe, 2021).

Media and Climate Discourse in Pakistan

Pakistan has been facing recurrent climatic challenges but it is under-researched on the issue of climate communication. The fact is that Pakistan is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world (Germanwatch, 2023) yet there is a lack of existing literature on how the vulnerability is represented in the media, especially editorial writing, which takes a functional role in opinion formation.

Some studies have looked at climate reporting in Pakistani media. For example, a study carried out on examining the television coverage of the 2010 floods, it observed that the stories focused largely on emotional narratives, with minimal debate of institutional accountability (Bukhari & Yousaf, 2018). Another study found that many Urdu newspaper articles explained droughts using religious arguments, avoiding critique of infrastructure and policy. Although these studies are insightful, they pay much attention to news coverage or the media in the Urdu language and have little interaction with English-language editorials, which hold a unique position in the development of elite and institutional discourse. It also raises a question that how editorials reinforce or challenge dominant ideological positions. Similar findings have been observed as regional reports have suggested that the coverage of South Asian climatic catastrophes commonly emphasizes episodes of disaster over institutional explanations and thus constrained the continuity of public discussion regarding policy change and preparedness (Haque, 2020; Dutta, 2021).

Editorials Power and Blame

Editorials carry the publication's voice and are meant to persuade, thus differ from standard news articles. Editorials are the tools that help shape public understanding by directing attention toward specific causes and interpretations (Richardson, 2007). They provide a rich ground for Critical Discourse Analysis, because of their opinion-driven nature.

In the context of Pakistani media, editorials often comment on major climatic events, including floods, storms, and heatwaves. These editorials frame the events in various ways: some blame governance, others appeal for global aid. Analysis enable us to identify how blame is endorsed. It further uncovers how the media shapes public opinion and either suggest or resist structural awareness. Furthermore, the analysis of editorial discourse has revealed that in opinion texts, attributions of blame tend to indicate larger ideological orientations, with the aspect of responsibility possibly being tactically relocated outside of national institutions and onto abstract powers or foreign agents (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Climate Justice in Media Representation

The idea of climate justice is becoming a global climate issue particularly in the Global South. The crux of the matter is that least contributors to global emissions such as Pakistan are the ones who get affected most of the time. Okereke (2010) highlighted the importance of justice-oriented stories that should take into account the historical inequality, economic vulnerability, and the world power processes.

Pakistan has already started to see some of these themes reflected in the Pakistani newspapers, which have criticized the need to finance climate internationally and the disproportionate burden on marginalized communities. This framing pattern is however not always identical. Editorials, in many cases, return to event-based framing without arguing about the long-term structural factors. CDA aid in identifying these patterns. Recent media research assert that climate inequality should not be framed in justice-focused ways in the mainstream discourse, as it may undermine how people can know about climate inequality and how they can pressurize governments to reform at home and hold people and governments accountable internationally (Chakrabarty, 2021; Nash et al., 2022).

Rationale for the Present Study

Given the limited research on editorial discourse in Pakistan, particularly through the lens of CDA, this study aims to fill an important gap. News articles and TV reports have been researched up to a certain point, but editorials, even though of an influential character, have not been researched extensively. The four editorials discussed in this paper were written in 2025 when the cities such as Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Peshawar were experiencing extreme weather. With the use of CDA and the framing theory, the research will examine the way climate-related events are framed, who is held responsible or exonerated, and whether the global themes such as climate justice are evoked. It is not merely to comprehend what these editorials say, but the language used indicates the manner in which the language articulates larger ideological stances, which could inform further climate conversation in Pakistan in the future.

METHODOLOGY

As the aim of this study was to explore the underlying ideas, not just what is said but how it is said, thus a qualitative approach was most appropriate. Rather than relying on numerical analysis and content coding, this study focuses on the deeper meanings embedded in discourse. This method was useful in achieving the broader goal of understanding ideology and framing within journalistic discourse, particularly opinion-driven editorials which are persuasive by nature.

Qualitative discourse analysis allows to pay close attention to words of language, rhetorical choice and contextual meaning, which are key to comprehending the construction and normalization of climate narratives in media texts.

The study utilized Norman Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a guiding theoretical framework. CDA does not view language as a neutral tool. Instead, it sees language as reflecting and shaping social realities. Fairclough's model is three dimensional: including textual analysis, discursive practice, and the social practice, where the broader cultural and ideological context is taken into consideration. This model was chosen because it allows for a multi-layered interpretation of media language, which is essential when dealing with politically and socially charged issues like climate change.

These micro-level linguistic decisions are interrelated with macro-levels of power, responsibility and ideology by crossing these three levels. In terms of data collection, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Four editorial articles were identified, and each of them was published in May 2025 as a response to the same climate-related incident intense hailstorm that hit Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar. The newspapers were Dawn, The Nation, Islamabad Post, and Pakistan Today that all include the editorials in the English language. The time was chosen because May 2025 is when individuals and media were more focused on the extreme weather events, and it can be compared how the different outlets perceived the same time frame of climatic upheaval.

There were two reasons as to why English-language newspapers were chosen. To start with, they serve policymakers, scholars and global readership and thus they are disproportionately influential in elite discourse. Second, the texts of CDA studies have been numerous with English texts, thus the approach of analysis is consistent with the literature.

The official websites of the editorials were used to obtain the editorials. After gathering all the articles, they were read several times to familiarize with the tone, style, patterns of repetitions. Notes were made to write down significant lexical choices, e.g. use of passive constructions or emotionally charged words. After the initial reading, a second round of analysis focused on identifying themes related to climate responsibility, framing of causes, and references to international or domestic action. Special attention was paid to whether the texts included or omitted concepts such as "climate justice," and whether particular actors (e.g., the government, public, or international institutions) were portrayed as responsible.

The actual analysis process followed Fairclough's levels. On the textual level, grammatical features and lexical selections were examined. For instance, whether actions were described using passive verbs (e.g., "warnings were ignored") or active ones (e.g., "officials ignored warnings") made a significant difference in how blame was distributed. On the discourse practice level, consideration

was given to the style of editorial writing, which tends to combine persuasive language with a formal tone. Lastly, the social practice level involved linking the editorial narratives to Pakistan's broader social and political dynamics, especially its vulnerability to climate events and limited role in contributing to global emissions.

There was little consideration of ethics because of using publicly available content. There were no interviews or personal data, and the study was conducted in accordance with the overall ethical principles of media and text research. Citations were made of all sources and the interpretation of the text was supposed to be objective and contextual. However, one ethical challenge in discourse analysis is the researcher's own bias. To overcome the possible impact of researcher bias, the analysis has been performed in a reflexive manner with acknowledgment the fact that interpretation in CDA is guided by the theoretical postulation of the analyst and scholarly education.

Like all research, this study has limitations. It also only looks at editorials in English language, leaving behind a big portion of the Urdu language discourse that might have a different cultural or political framing. Moreover, the sample can also not be regarded representative of the entire Pakistani media as it is analyzed based on four texts. The results are very detailed and cannot be generalized. Moreover, no empirical reader feedback is included in the study, so it is not within the bounds of the study to determine how these editorials influence the way people think.

The methodology effectively meets the goals of the research. Through the use of CDA as editorial discourse, the study methodically demonstrates the role of linguistic decisions in developing the perception of the issue of climate change, responsibility, and justice in the context of media in Pakistan.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This analysis applies Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to reveal how climatic events are framed, who is blamed, and whether broader themes such as state responsibility or global justice are addressed.

Through multiple readings all the editorials were examined to identify recurring patterns, lexical choices, tone, and ideological markers. Modal verbs (e.g., "should," and "must"), active and passive constructions, metaphors, and appeals to authority or emotions were particularly analyzed. Although the publications are addressing the similar issue, the patterns reflect varied discursive positions. Such a comparative method enables the analysis to look beyond the texts, and determine more general trends in Pakistani editorial discourse on climate change.

Textual Features and Lexical Choices

All four editorials use different vocabulary to describe the same climatic events. Islamabad Post use of vocabulary varied across the four editorials to describe climate events. Islamabad Post and The Nation repeatedly used words like disaster, havoc, and unprecedented. These two words imply the strangeness of the situation and stress the urgency. Dawn, by contrast, employed such words as climate volatility, environmental mismanagement, which involve more systemic interpretation of the events. Such variations mean that there are differences in the frames used to interpret them:

some of the editorials focus on shock and urgency, and some frame climate events in terms of larger institutional and environmental processes.

Metaphors also varied across newspapers. For instance, Pakistan Today described the climate change as “a ticking bomb waiting to explode,” dramatizing the threat while implying inevitability. On the other hand, Dawn used the phrase “a predictable outcome of long-ignored warnings,” which assigns clear responsibility to governance failures.

Passive voice is also used in several places in order to obscure the agent who failed to act. As an example, the words such as measures were not taken or warnings were not followed are employed to displace the attention of particular responsible parties. These are linguistic decisions aimed at diluting the criticism and evading political confrontation.

Framing of Responsibility

One of the key objective of this study was to uncover how blame and responsibility is constructed. In this case, some definite differences between the newspapers were observed.

The editorial by Dawn is more assertive and states clearly that the combination of bad city planning, bad policy and response to emergency was the cause of the crisis. It calls out both local and federal institutions and includes references to previous warnings by climate experts. This editorial adopts what can be termed a “structural blame frame,” where systemic neglect is central to the argument.

In contrast, The Nation editorial leans into a more nationalist tone. While it acknowledges the damage, it places much of the blame on international inaction and global emissions. The argument presented is that Pakistan suffers because of the environmental recklessness of industrialized countries. Although such framing is consistent with the global climate inequality narratives, it also has a danger of downplaying domestic responsibility and domestic policy failures.

The Islamabad Post editorial straddles both approaches. It begins by highlighting the devastation and expressing solidarity with victims but shifts halfway to demand more global climate funds. There is little mention of national preparedness or policy gaps. The absence of local self-reflection here may signal an ideological leaning toward externalizing blame.

Engagement with Climate Justice

The concept of climate justice is emerging in global discourse but is not yet a consistent feature in Pakistan’s editorials. Among the four texts analyzed, only Dawn engaged directly with this notion. It referenced Pakistan’s minimal contribution to global emissions compared to its high vulnerability, and it called for both internal reform and international support. While brief, this was the clearest articulation of a justice-based argument.

Pakistan Today made vague appeals to “fair treatment by the world community,” but the editorial lacked any substantial development of what justice might look like, or how historical responsibility factors into current vulnerability. The other two editorials (The Nation and Islamabad Post) focused on the international responsibility but never based their argument on moral or ethical grounds that can be related to justice.

What this implies is that climate justice is a new concept, but it is not a dominating or well established frame in Pakistani editorials. It has consequences on the way the general population is informed about international discussions and pressure is exerted on local and international actors.

Discourse Practice and Production

The editorials are not written in a vacuum. This is determined by institutional ideology of the newspaper, editorial policies and expected audience. The tone and angle of the article was indicative of more profound assumptions in the role of the state, the international community, and the media itself, in all four cases. The Nation, as an example, is known to be more conservative and nationalistic. For example, The Nation has a reputation for being more conservative and nationalist. This framing represents climate impacts as externally imposed. Dawn, on the other hand, has maintained a critical and reform-oriented stance, which is visible in its focus on local governance and planning failures.

All four texts adopt a formal yet emotive tone, which is a common feature in editorials. Phrases like "we must act now" or "a wake-up call for our leaders" designed to create urgency and suggest to perform. This performativity, however, does not always provide clarity about what should be done and by whom.

Social Context and Ideological Signals

Fairclough's third dimension, social practice, help us to analyze how the text relates to broader societal structures. These editorials are written in the context of climate disasters, limited policy response, and constrained media freedom.

One of the frequent theme was the idea of helplessness. Editorials frequently constructed Pakistan as a victim or object rather than an agent. While this mirrors geopolitical reality to some extent, it may also hinder the locally produced discourse from demanding change and accountability from within. Such framing is in line with the finding by van Dijk (1998) that media discourse may influence the development of cognitive models that emphasize the blame on external factors rather than internal reflection.

Moreover, marginalized people are rarely discussed in the editorials, despite the fact that the poor and marginalized communities are overly affected by the climate disasters. This is ideologically significant. Editorials, by omitting references to class, rural infrastructure, or gender disparities, the editorials present a normalized narrative of suffering, that avoids dealing with inequality within the nation.

DISCUSSION

The review of the chosen editorials indicates that the Pakistani English-language newspapers have a variety of and even contradictory stories of the climate events. Although editorials were covering the same storms in May 2025, it was clear that each editorial decided to highlight different angles and this aspect also influenced the way the reader would perceive the events. There are those that emphasized on the injustice in the world whereas others were more domestic and focused on the failure of the government.

Dawn, for example, focused more critically on internal planning failures and policy neglect. This is significant as it demonstrates the desire of the paper to subject itself to self-criticism and openness to the world. The Nation, in contrast, presented the issue as mostly based on international negligence. Although it is factual that Pakistan does not contribute much to the world in terms of emissions, but the country is discriminated, the same framing can be applied to avoid local responsibility.

Islamabad Post, in its turn, adopted a middle-ground position, sympathizing with those harmed, but not providing meaningful criticism of how the country was prepared to deal with it. That editorial seemed more concerned with calling for global aid than with addressing whether early warnings were ignored or infrastructure was inadequate. This reflects a broader media pattern in which climate change is treated as something happening to Pakistan, rather than a crisis demanding internal reform as well.

What stood out most was the overall vagueness in assigning responsibility. Many sentences were written in the passive voice: "measures were not taken," "warnings were missed", leaving the reader to guess who failed. These linguistic choices are not neutral. As Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1998) both suggest, the way problems are framed in language has real implications for how people understand causes and solutions.

As a viewpoint of Critical Discourse Analysis, this linguistic ambiguity makes climate crises seem de-political. The editorial discourse can make the institutional failure so familiar and minimize the chances of the long-term pressure on the institution to take responsibility by obscuring agency and not mentioning who holds the responsibility. This confirms the point by Fairclough that discourse is not simply a reflection of reality but instead an active part of the process of upholding or opposing power relations.

Another noticeable issue was the limited engagement with the concept of climate justice. Except for Dawn, none of the editorials clearly articulated the idea that those who pollute less often suffer more. While the phrase "climate justice" is starting to appear in academic and activist circles, its absence in editorial discourse means that many readers may never encounter the concept unless they actively seek it out.

Also striking was the lack of focus on social inequality. No editorial meaningfully discussed how different groups, such as low-income families, informal workers, or women were affected differently by the hailstorms. The public is thus presented with a generalized narrative of suffering, missing the fact that climate events often deepen existing inequalities. According to CDA, what is left unsaid is just as telling as what is emphasized.

Such silence is especially important in such a country as Pakistan, where vulnerability to climate is closely interrelated with the classes, infrastructure, and access to resources. When editorials neglect to address these socio-economic factors, they recreate a homogenous national outlook thereby ignoring the fact that various groups are more or less at risk and instead of looking at the reality of structural inequality they view the climate discussions through a sense of general loss.

Ultimately, these editorials are doing more than summarizing events. They are shaping public memory and expectation. Failing to challenge power, to raise awareness of vulnerable populations,

and long-term planning are all parts of a pattern of unintentional compliance with the media, rather than creating a culture of preparedness and reform.

CONCLUSION

In May 2025, major English-language newspapers responded after some urban areas in Pakistan were hit by unexpected hailstorms. The current study is based on the response of four editorials to these events, the manner in which they interpret these events and the location of the blame.

Despite the fact that the four editorials all admitted that the climate change was a disaster, they were not the same in tone and focus. For instance, Dawn iterated local governance failures, others blame international actors and offers more detached commentary. A pattern of cautious language emerged, especially when it came to attributing direct blame.

Additionally, climate justice themes were almost absent in the Editorials. They made little or no mention of how vulnerable groups might tolerate the burden of these events. That omission is not neutral, rather it shapes reader's sense of determination and objectivity. The study applied Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework to reveal the arguments made and the silences embedded within them.

Collectively, these results can imply that the Pakistani editorial discourse is more likely to construct climate crises in terms of immediacy and loss and less likely to engage in a long-term approach to the problem of structural inequality, institutional responsibility, and justice views. Such framing implications are critical in the manner that the problem of climate change is viewed as a social and political problem rather than a natural disaster.

Editorials therefore are not merely informative; they shape attitudes and behaviors of individuals towards issues. In case these editorials dedicated more space to the discussion of inequality and systemic risk, they could contribute to leading the climate discourse to a more encompassing and socially conscious direction.

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