



**A Climate of Silence:
Structural Barriers to Climate Change Reporting in Pakistani Media**

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Abstract:

Climate change reporting in Pakistan faces multiple structural, institutional, and functional constraints that limit thematic and solution-oriented coverage. This qualitative study examines the factors that shape climate change narratives in Pakistani media. To understand the underreporting of climate change events and the limited use of solution-based frames, this study applies agenda-setting, framing, and political economy theories. To examine structural and institutional barriers to climate reporting, data were collected through in-depth interviews with twelve journalists, editors, and media gatekeepers from leading media outlets, including Geo News, ARY News, Express News, and SAMA TV. Using thematic analysis, the results identify seven key themes: media organizational structure, political economy influence, financial constraints, contributory negligence, information barriers, media agenda policies, and operational issues. The findings further reveal that climate coverage is largely event-based, with climate issues receiving attention mainly during disasters such as floods and smog. The study finds that climate journalism in Pakistan is constrained by editorial agendas, financial limitations, and weak institutional support. To address these issues, the study recommends investing in journalist training, strengthening editorial independence, improving regulatory enforcement, and ensuring greater transparency from government agencies and NGOs.

Keywords: Pakistani media, climate change, framing theory, agenda-setting, political economy, media culture

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is a low emitter of greenhouse gases (less than 1% of total global emissions); however, it is one of the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world (Malik et al., 2012). Pakistan ranked first among countries most affected by extreme weather events in 2022, according to the Germanwatch Climate Risk Index (2025), primarily due to economic losses estimated at US\$30 billion. These events, including unprecedented floods that submerged one-third of the country (Ali & Kandhro, 2015; Raja et al., 2018), underscore the urgent need for comprehensive climate change reporting. Since climate change adaptation and mitigation are cross-cutting issues, they must be addressed in an integrated manner (Houghton & Hackler, 2001; Thiele et al., 2017) and with a strong sense of

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urgency (Leiserowitz, 2006; Leiserowitz et al., 2013; Maibach et al., 2008; Nisbet & Mayers, 2007). However, climate change reporting in Pakistani media is frequently limited to surface-level issues (Islam et al., 2019). Journalists face numerous challenges, including a lack of resources, political influence, and editorial restrictions, which hinder their ability to report on climate change effectively. This paper examines these obstacles through the experiences of journalists and media organisations in Pakistan.

This study focuses on the following research questions: Which organizational, institutional, and structural obstacles influence climate change reporting in Pakistani media? How do economic, political, and regulatory pressures influence journalists' ability to cover climate change?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media reporting on climate change is a complex issue that has been extensively studied and documented by leading research institutions and in the scholarly literature. There is a clear consensus among prominent climatologists that anthropogenic activities are the primary cause of disruption to the Earth's climate system (Cook et al., 2016; Myers et al., 2021; Oreskes, 2018; Weart, 2010). However, scholars argue that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), owing to its intergovernmental and consensus-based structure, has historically adopted a cautious framing that limits the explicit articulation of anthropogenic activities as an urgent global political issue (Porter et al., 2018).

Communication plays a crucial role in building public understanding of climate change and supporting mitigation efforts (Pidgeon, 2012). Environmental journalism emerged in Western countries during the 1960s, driven by concerns over science, militarism, and chemical pollution (Neuzil, 2020). These developments prompted media organisations to hire specialised journalists to cover environmental events in the 1970s (Friedman, 2015). Initially, climate change reporting focused on wildlife protection; however, media attention shifted to reporting climate change events after climate scientists revealed the full extent of the phenomenon in the 1980s (Friedman, 2015). By 1988, climate change reporting had become a prominent item on the media agenda (Boykoff, 2007).

Environmental reporting requires significant financial and journalistic resources for proactive, rather than reactive, coverage (van Staden & Hooks, 2007). Furthermore, the growth of environmental journalism is often associated with worsening climate conditions in certain regions (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007). Unfortunately, the growth of climate journalism remains comparatively limited in various regions like the Global South (Nassanga et al., 2016).

Climate change is a scientific issue, but it entered the media agenda only when political parties incorporated it into their own political agendas (Anderson, 2009; Hulme, 2009). Accordingly, the media establish various claims and frames to publicise the scientific consensus on climate change, although some outlets cultivate doubt or suppress urgency in order to present climate sceptic perspectives under the guise of balanced coverage (Trumbo, 1996). Such uncertainty frames significantly affect public engagement with climate action. Furthermore, frames centred on health, economy, or nature conservation demonstrably affect public attitudes and policy responses. Strategic media framing in climate change communication is therefore essential for constructive public engagement and effective climate action (Nisbet, 2009).

Multiple studies also demonstrate the relationship between sporadic media coverage of climate change and the occurrence of extreme weather events such as droughts and wildfires (Hopke, 2020). As a developing country, Pakistan is among those most severely affected by climate change and is ranked among the most climatically vulnerable nations in the world (Fahad & Wang, 2020; Malik et al., 2012; Hussain et al., 2020). The Global Climate Risk Index reports that the 2022 floods caused financial losses of approximately US\$15.2 billion to Pakistan (Ayaz & Ahmed, 2024). Despite this high climate vulnerability, Pakistani media have failed to foster a comprehensive public understanding of climate risk through their coverage (Islam et al., 2019). It is therefore imperative to understand why climate change, as a pressing issue, is not being strategically covered in Pakistani media. This study aims to explore the barriers that hinder effective climate change communication and to address this gap in the literature.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study explores the media's role in shaping public awareness of climate change in Pakistan by drawing on four key theories: agenda setting, framing, political economy, and media culture. These perspectives help explain why climate change remains underreported or poorly represented in the mainstream media.

Agenda Setting Theory

McCombs & Shaw (1972) suggest that while media may not dictate what people think, they do influence what people think about. When climate change is regularly reported, it becomes a public priority. In Pakistan, however, climate-related news tends to be covered mainly during extreme weather events such as floods or smog. As a result, coverage tends to be episodic rather than continuous (Boykoff, 2008).

Framing Theory

According to Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), the media shape public understanding of an issue by framing and selectively highlighting aspects of reality. Climate change can be framed as a scientific, economic, moral, or disaster issue, and each framing has a distinct impact on public opinion (Nisbet, 2009; O'Neill et al., 2015). The frame in which a story is presented can be as significant as the story itself. In Political Economy Theory, Herman and Chomsky (1988) highlight the role of ownership and commercial interests in media content. In Pakistan, media houses are dependent on advertisements from companies such as those that are responsible for environmental degradation. The dependence of media on big businesses to fund their operations usually prevents them from criticizing the same businesses, which restricts their ability to report on climate change honestly and in depth (McChesney, 2008).

Political Economy Theory

Herman and Chomsky (1988) highlight the role of ownership and commercial pressures on media content. In Pakistan, media houses are dependent on advertisements from companies, including those responsible for environmental degradation. The media's financial dependence on the corporate sector often constrains journalists' ability to openly criticise the corporate role in climate degradation (McChesney, 2008), which in turn compromises the quality of climate reporting.

Media Culture Theory

Hall (1980) emphasises the professional norms and newsroom routines that shape journalistic practice. Climate change is a slow-moving and complex issue, which makes it difficult to incorporate into the fast-paced, attention-driven news environment. In Pakistan, limited training in science reporting and an over-reliance on press releases also compromise the quality and depth of coverage (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

These theories offer a framework for understanding the structural, economic, and cultural barriers that limit effective and meaningful reporting of climate change. They offer a useful starting point for this study, which aims to better understand why such an important global issue remains absent from the media agenda in Pakistan, and how these dynamics might be addressed to support more informed public discourse.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using thematic analysis to understand the barriers faced by journalists in reporting climate change in Pakistan. Thematic analysis is particularly suitable for identifying patterns, generating themes, and gaining deeper insight into complex phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sukamolson, 2007). In-depth interviews were conducted with journalists and other key media professionals. This approach enabled us to explore participants' experiences in depth and to gain insight into the perspectives that have shaped climate change reporting (Patton, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were conducted through face-to-face meetings and online platforms, depending on participant availability and geographical accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted primarily in Urdu and English according to participant preference. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Thematic analysis was conducted in six iterative steps, which involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, defining and naming themes, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process allowed us to identify the core barriers that journalists and media organizations faced in presenting or reporting climate change information.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured that their identities and responses would remain confidential and would only be used for academic purposes. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences.

Population

The study population consisted of key stakeholders in Pakistani media who play a central role in shaping news agendas, including media owners, gatekeepers, bureau chiefs, editors, and journalists. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, socio-economic status, and education were not considered as selection criteria, because of an emphasis on professional roles and experiences. The inclusion of a broad range of media professionals allowed the study to gain a comprehensive

picture of contemporary institutional and structural barriers in the Pakistani media (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select participants from four major Pakistani news organizations: ARY News, Express News, Geo News, and SAMA TV. These organizations were chosen because of their prominent influence on public discourse and their role in shaping climate change narratives. Convenience sampling was applied within the purposive sampling framework to accommodate the busy schedules of media professionals. The final sample included 15 participants, which is in line with qualitative research norms that emphasize deeper insights rather than covering a large number of cases (Patton, 2015). Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Saturation is the point at which no new themes emerged from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006). Saturation was achieved after 12 interviews, and therefore, no additional data collection was considered necessary.

Data Analysis and Finding

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from in-depth interviews with journalists and media professionals, following the six-stage process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach allowed a systematic analysis of the data to identify patterns, generate themes, and provide insights into the challenges journalists face in reporting climate change.

The analysis began with the first step, familiarization, in which interview transcripts were read multiple times to develop an overall understanding of the data. This was followed by initial coding, where relevant quotations were highlighted and labelled according to their significance to the research objectives. Similar codes were then grouped together to reflect the recurring ideas and experiences shared by the participants. To enhance coding reliability and trustworthiness, the process involved repeated review and comparison of interview transcripts to ensure consistency of interpretation and to strengthen analytical rigour.

In the theme development stage, these initial codes were reviewed, refined, and organized into broader categories that reflected the core patterns in the data. These themes were then defined and named to clearly represent the central phenomena in climate change reporting in Pakistani media. The final step involved reporting, whereby the themes were organised to present a coherent narrative of the findings. Several prominent themes emerged from the analysis, highlighting the complex factors that constrain climate change reporting in Pakistan. The prominent themes identified were media organizational structure, political economy influence, contributory negligence, information barriers, financial constraints and miscellaneous issues that could not be categorized under any theme. The researcher grouped the sub-categories into core themes that represented the central phenomenon of the research. These themes provide a structured understanding of the complex factors that hinder effective climate change reporting in Pakistani media. Following this narrative, a themes and codes table is presented to illustrate the detailed subcategories and specific insights derived from the interviews.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process. Given the researchers' familiarity with Pakistani media environments and journalistic practices, deliberate efforts were

made to minimise personal assumptions and allow interpretations to emerge directly from participant narratives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis revealed seven core themes affecting climate reporting. Sub-categories and participant verbatim extracts are included to illustrate the findings.

Table 3.1: Themes and Codes

Serial No.	Principle Themes	Codes
1	Media Organizational structure	Institutional Prioritization, Media Routine, Breaking News Culture
2	Political Economy Influence	Government and Economic Policy Influence, Industrialists/Business Tycoons/Advertising Influence
3	Financial Constraints	Financial Dependency on Advertising, Dependency on TRPs and Audience Demand, Lack of Specialized Expertise, Multiplicity of Beat Coverage
4	Contributory Negligence	Government Negligence, PEMRA Negligence, Media Negligence
5	Barricade of Information	Climate Change Ministry, Environmental NGOs, Authorities Restriction
6	Media Agenda Policy	Political Agenda Becomes Media Agenda, Bandwagon Technique
7	Miscellaneous Issues	Limited Space and Time, Limited Resources of Information, Language Barrier, Conditional Focusing

Theme# 1: Media organizational Structure

This theme examines how institutional structures within Pakistani media organisations shape the limited attention given to climate change reporting. The findings suggest that climate change is not treated as a core journalistic priority and is frequently displaced by political and breaking news coverage.

Code 1: Institutional Prioritization. The data indicate that climate change reporting occupies a secondary position within newsroom hierarchies. Journalists assigned to this beat often face competing demands, especially when organizational resources such as reporters, camera teams, or OB vans are redirected toward political or high-profile news coverage. As a result, planned or ongoing climate-related stories are frequently missed or delayed. This code is illustrated by Respondent 10 below.

Respondent # 10:

“Now that I've been assigned the climate change beat, I'll be responsible for covering any climate change-related event that occurs in Islamabad. However, political news and other issues are often given more importance. If there's a shortage of reporters, cameramen, or OB vans, I might need to cover those stories instead, leading to missed coverage of many climate change events. For example, right now, there's a lot of focus on Parliament because of policy-making decisions, so we spend most of our time there.”

Code 2: Media Routine. The second code identified by participants concerns the routine structure of the newsroom. Pakistani media channels do not treat climate change as a priority, instead allocating disproportionate space and time to political content. If a media organisation were to consistently focus on climate change and integrate it into its routine coverage, this could exert meaningful pressure on policymakers and the public to act on the issue.

Respondent # 4:

“It should be a priority issue, but it isn't for any media organization here. The reason is the politically volatile scenario. We focus on pro-government and anti-government cases, as well as political or governmental developments, which generate so much news that all our reporters are occupied with those stories. Our audience prefers listening to political news. Moreover, covering climate change isn't part of our channel's agenda. Political news breakthroughs are our channel's top priority, so we only focus on that.”

Code # 3: Breaking News Culture. Another important factor influencing climate change reporting is the dominance of breaking news culture within Pakistani media organisations. Media organisations tend to address issues in an improvised manner, prioritising immediate responses over sustained coverage. Climate change is a scientific issue, and the general public in Pakistan has limited knowledge of the phenomenon; however, public concern rises when specific climate events directly affect people or occur in their vicinity.

Respondent # 5:

“When floods or smog issues begin, the media starts full coverage on them. As long as these issues persist, the media covers them within a limited framework. However, as soon as the intensity of these events subsides, the media's attention also fades away. So, we cannot broadcast these issues on a regular basis because the interest level always drops when the public doesn't feel any emotions with that issue.”

Collectively, these findings indicate that climate change reporting in Pakistan is shaped by institutional priorities, newsroom routines, and an event-driven news culture. From an agenda-setting perspective, issues that receive limited editorial attention are less likely to remain salient in public discourse. Similarly, gatekeeping processes within news organizations influence which stories are prioritized for coverage, often favouring political developments over environmental concerns. These findings also support the political economy perspective, which holds that newsroom decisions are strongly influenced by audience preferences, commercial competition, and ratings-driven content production.

Theme # 2: Political Economy Influence

This theme examines how political economy and economic interests shape climate change coverage in Pakistan's media organisations. The findings indicate that climate change reporting is largely embedded within a system of state-media-industry relations in which information flows are controlled, selective, and strategically framed. Rather than reflecting independent environmental journalism, media content is primarily shaped by institutional dependencies on government communication channels and powerful economic actors.

Code # 1: Government and Economic Policy Influence. The data indicate that government institutions play a central role in shaping climate change narratives by controlling access to

information and regulating what is communicated through the media. In Pakistan, media channels function largely as conduits for official statements without significant independent verification. Media organisations rely heavily on official data and government sources for reporting climate-related events. At the same time, government economic policies often prioritise development projects, which may cause policymakers to overlook the risks of climate change.

Respondent #4

“We have WhatsApp groups with government officials where they share press releases with us. This information is provided equally to all media channels. For example, how many brick kilns are operating in which areas, how many are not using zigzag technology, and how many we have sealed, etc. These updates are usually not very detailed, just an official document with limited information, and media organizations are not allowed to ask any questions. So, this is how they provide information to the media.”

Similarly, the government has used climate change reporting through the media to highlight Pakistan’s vulnerability and garner international sympathy and pledges for climate justice.

Respondent # 6:

“During the days of the COP summit, we receive press release notes in our WhatsApp groups, and the government orders us to air them as they are. We simply broadcast this information to the public. However, we are not given any specific instructions to cover the climate change issue beyond Pakistan’s borders. Even during such times, the media only mentions that Pakistan is affected by climate change, but there’s no detailed explanation of the causes or the solutions, nor is there any information on what steps the government is taking to tackle it. This limits public awareness. And even if reasons are provided, they are short-term, which the audience can easily forget.”

The government is primarily responsible for issuing NOCs for environmentally dangerous projects while often neglecting the enforcement for climate change regulations. Moreover, a significant enforcement deficit exists in climate change policy implementation, partly because many public officeholders are business figures who run development companies and seek to protect their financial interests.

Respondent #3:

“Obviously, everyone with businesses in Pakistan—whether in real estate, multinational companies, pharmaceuticals, mining, agricultural products manufacturing, or pesticides, are key stakeholders who might avoid spreading climate change awareness to protect their financial interests. When it comes to the government, they have their own personal companies that are contributing to environmental degradation.

Code # 2: Industrial/ Business Tycoons / Advertisers Influence. Industrialists and business tycoons are among the primary contributors to climate degradation. Through financial support for political campaigns, they frequently exert considerable influence over politicians and political parties. The findings thus indicate that industrialists and business tycoons play a significant role in shaping both policy direction and media narratives related to climate change.

Respondent # 9:

“Yes, absolutely, there is influence. For example, if you talk about moving towards electric vehicles (EV), the transportation unions have created significant hurdles for the government, and then the petrol car industry also caused obstacles. Now, all the businessmen are holding positions in government offices, and they are all interconnected. Their interests are tied to one another, and they can influence media content and government decisions. Moreover, they can delay decisions related to climate change policies.”

Overall, the findings indicate that climate change communication in Pakistan is shaped by political and economic power structures. Consistent with political economy theory, media organisations operate within a system of dependency on state institutions and powerful business actors, whose interests shape both policy priorities and media narratives. Consequently, climate change reporting tends to reflect dominant political and economic agendas rather than independent environmental reporting.

Theme # 3: Financial Constraints

This theme examines how financial pressures shape climate change reporting in Pakistani media. The findings show that media coverage is strongly influenced by revenue needs, audience preferences, and limited organisational resources. As a result, climate change receives considerably less attention than political and entertainment content. From a political economy perspective, these conditions illustrate how economic survival and market pressures restrict editorial independence and shape news priorities.

Code # 1: Financial Dependency on advertising. The data indicate that media organisations rely heavily on advertising revenue for their financial survival. Advertisers include political actors, government institutions, industrialists, and business groups. Because of this dependency, media outlets often avoid reporting negatively about their sponsors, especially when it involves environmentally harmful activities.

Respondent # 4:

“Media organizations run on the funds provided by politicians, government institutions, business tycoons, and industrialists in the form of advertisements or publicity. Besides this, these same people also protect us from our competitors; otherwise, we wouldn't be able to survive. Now, we can't broadcast news against these advertisers, like telling the public not to invest in their colonies because they pose a threat to the environment. They give us millions of rupees, so how can we go against them?”

This reflects how financial dependence limits editorial freedom. In such a situation, reporting is carefully managed to avoid damaging relationships with powerful advertisers, even when matters of public interest, such as environmental harm, are at stake.

Code # 2: Dependency on TRP and Audience Demand. The findings further indicate that media content is largely driven by ratings and audience interest. In Pakistan's media environment, political news dominates because it attracts higher viewership, while climate change is frequently sidelined owing to low audience demand.

Respondent #4:

“It should be a priority issue, but it isn't for any media organization here. The reason is the politically volatile scenario. We focus on pro-government and anti-government cases, as well as political or governmental developments, which generate so much news that all our reporters are occupied with those stories. Our audience prefers listening to political news. Moreover, covering climate change isn't part of our channel's agenda. Political news breakthroughs are our channel's top priority, so we only focus on that”

Code # 3: Lack of Specialized Expertise. Given the persistent financial constraints facing media organisations, hiring a specialist reporter or journalist for less commercially engaging content is rarely considered cost-effective. Consequently, climate change content often fails to convey why the issue is critically important or to present comprehensive reporting through media outlets.

Respondent # 6:

“In Pakistan, neither print nor electronic media is considering climate change issues on a priority basis. In our Pakistani media, the highest preference is given to political content, followed by entertainment, and then other categories. In Pakistan, climate change is treated as a minor issue because reporters and anchors are not well-informed about it. 80% of them don't even know the reasons behind it, and the remaining 20% don't have enough content available. Moreover, broadcast and print media don't allocate enough space or time for this issue to allow for detailed reporting. For instance, when it rains, the news covers how many houses collapsed, how many people died under the rubble, or how much destruction was caused by storms or heavy winds. However, these events are not linked to climate change. One of the reasons for this is the lack of knowledge and training among reporters and anchors.”

Code # 4: Multiplicity of Beat Coverage. The findings further reveal that due to staff shortages and financial constraints, journalists are frequently required to cover multiple beats simultaneously. This limits their ability to develop expertise in any single area, particularly in technically demanding subjects such as climate change.

Respondent # 11

“Another reason is that to talk about such issues, experts are needed. Unfortunately, most of our anchors are primarily focused on politics. They read the news in newspapers and create their programs based on that. To create a program on a specific issue, they would need to study the topic themselves, but they don't have the time for that. In technical issues, you can't just say anything off the top of your head, so they avoid discussing such specific issues and prefer to talk about more general topics related to their own expertise or interests.”

Overall, the findings suggest that financial pressures strongly influence how climate change is covered in the media. Dependence on advertising revenue, audience-driven programming, a lack of trained journalists, and excessive workloads all contribute to the marginalisation of environmental issues. Consistent with political economy theory, media content in this context is shaped more by financial imperatives and market demands than by public interest or environmental urgency.

Theme# 4: Contributory Negligence

This theme examines how the combined negligence of government institutions, regulatory bodies, and media organisations contributes to weak climate change communication in Pakistan. The

findings suggest that despite the existence of policies and regulatory frameworks, implementation and enforcement remain weak. As a result, climate change awareness is not consistently integrated into mainstream media discourse, limiting public understanding and engagement.

Code # 1: Government Negligence. The Climate Change Ministry of Pakistan (CCMP) is responsible for managing climate change issues, enforcing climate change legislation, and taking action against violations of climate change policy. Although this Ministry represents a credible source of information for journalists, it is not fulfilling its mandate to implement and disseminate climate change policies. Furthermore, it remains reluctant to share relevant information with media outlets.

Respondent # 5:

“If the government or the climate ministry were to create a policy requiring that this issue be included in every news bulletin, then we would have to research and create new reports daily to provide fresh information on the topic. In such a case, the issue could be properly discussed as part of our routine coverage. Otherwise, we can only produce reports when we receive information from seminars, surveys, or in the form of conclusions with facts and figures.”

“Public awareness messages also come from the government. If we look at the local level, if the government takes an initiative with full sincerity and dedication to raise public awareness, the media will certainly distribute it. For example, recently, when the green bus services started, their ads were broadcast regularly. So, if the government is serious, the media will also run climate change awareness messages. Even radio will play its part. Many public messages are paid, but a lot of public awareness campaigns are also done without payment from the government side to educate the public. When an issue becomes a cause of concern for the public and is at its peak, the media broadcasts it daily.”

Code # 2: PEMRA Negligence. PEMRA is the regulatory authority responsible for ensuring that media comply with government policies. The relevant policy stipulates that media should publicise climate change awareness and help create an informed citizenry, thereby supporting mitigation efforts and preventing further environmental deterioration.

Respondent # 10:

“Even though there is a climate change policy, and PEMRA have the authority to fine or penalize any media organization that advertises products or services that go against the climate change policy. But the truth is PEMRA also acts in line with the government’s directions. If we consider the ban on plastic water bottles and shopping bags, which was specifically enforced in Islamabad, it should have led to stories being produced on the issue, actions taken against violators, and notices from PEMRA to media channels, urging them to cover this topic. But it all reflects a lack of interest on the government’s part. Policies are created, yet there’s no enforcement.”

Code # 3: Media Negligence. The data further indicate that media organisations themselves contribute to the neglect of climate change by prioritising politically and commercially viable content. Environmental violations and long-term ecological issues are frequently underreported unless they become part of a major news event.

Respondent # 10:

“Media also plays a role in this negligence. Issues like climate violations from brick kilns, for example, are rarely covered because they’re not considered “core” issues. As a result, these problems only exist in documents, with neither the government nor the media taking them seriously. Both government and media seem to be operating as business models; companies whose products or services go against climate policies pay the media for advertisements, and the media, needing these finances to run, accepts them.”

Overall, the findings indicate that contributory negligence across government institutions, regulatory authorities, and media organizations weakens climate change communication in Pakistan. While policies and frameworks exist, their implementation is inconsistent, and enforcement mechanisms are weak. Within a political economy perspective, this reflects a shared institutional failure in which both state and media systems prioritise political and economic interests over sustained environmental awareness, resulting in the marginalisation of climate change discourse.

Theme # 5: Barricade of Information

This theme examines the institutional and structural barriers that restrict the flow of climate change information to media organisations. The findings suggest that key stakeholders, including government departments, NGOs, and local authorities, frequently restrict access to data and on-ground reporting opportunities. As a result, journalists face significant challenges in producing accurate, evidence-based, and solution-oriented climate change reports. Within a political economy context, this reflects controlled information environments in which access is restricted and mediated by institutional interests.

Code #1: Climate change Ministry. The data indicate that the Climate Change Ministry plays a limited role in providing consistent, transparent, and collaborative communication with media organisations. Journalists report that information sharing is largely restricted to formal press releases or routine updates, rather than meaningful engagement or data-driven reporting support. This restricts the development of investigative or solution-focused climate journalism.

Respondent # 10:

“Since I started covering the climate beat, I haven’t seen the ministry providing us with any clear messages. Nowadays, it’s mostly about Madam Rubina having a meeting, and then her PR team sends us a press release or a ticker with one or two images to pass along to our channels. However, the approach of bringing journalists on board and working collaboratively is very minimal.

Even government ministries seem to complete assignments just enough to maintain their records, but there’s little indication that the ministry is genuinely serious about raising public awareness or working on solution-oriented projects.”

Code # 2: Environmental NGOs. Environmental NGOs are expected to identify violations of climate change policy and raise awareness through the media to prompt regulatory action. However, NGOs in Pakistan are not fulfilling their responsibility to share factual, field-based climate change information with media personnel

Respondent # 5:

“Environmental NGOs are just working for funds. The media doesn't get any significant information from them. In fact, reporters conduct their own research to make reports. These NGOs hold awareness meetings in elite hotels like Ramada, where they invite reporters to take pictures, and there's some light-hearted conversation. But the people who are affected by the issue are nowhere in sight. It's all just a show for their finance providers.”

Code #3: Authorities Restrictions. The data further reveal that journalists face direct resistance and restrictions when attempting to report on environmental violations at industrial sites, hospitals, or housing developments. These barriers include denial of access, intimidation, and in some cases physical threats, all of which significantly hinder independent reporting.

Respondent # 5:

“We face the most challenges on the spot because no one provides us with this kind of information. As reporters, if we are working on a news report about hospital waste, the staff there often start fighting with us, and many times the situation becomes very difficult. But somehow, we still manage to report the issue. When reporting on colonies or factories, cameras are often broken. I have been held at gunpoint three times and made to sit on the ground for an hour and a half, being told not to do the reporting. And if there's a major or high-profile court case related to climate violations, we usually get that information from the courts, and we report on it. We have limitations. We can't write too much or delve too deeply because if we broadcast court news at our discretion, judges can call us and confront us in court. So, we also must be cautious about our own safety.”

Overall, the findings suggest that climate change communication is significantly constrained by institutional barriers across multiple levels. Government departments offer limited collaborative engagement, NGOs frequently fail to supply field-based data, and local authorities often restrict access to information through both formal and informal means. Within a political economy framework, these conditions reflect a controlled information environment in which access to environmental knowledge is mediated by institutional interests, limiting transparency and weakening public awareness of climate change.

Theme # 6: Media Agenda Policy

This theme examines how media agendas in Pakistan are shaped by political priorities and global media trends rather than by independent environmental framing. The findings suggest that climate change coverage is largely determined by political discourse and international media attention, while remaining marginal in routine national news agendas. From an agenda-setting perspective, political issues dominate media priorities, and climate change gains visibility mainly when it aligns with political or global narratives.

Code # 1: Political Agenda Becomes Media Agenda. McCombs and Shaw (1972, 1993) posit that mass media — newspapers, television, and radio — shape political narratives through agenda-setting. There has been a long debate about whether political narrative becomes a media agenda, or the media agenda becomes the political agenda. This dynamic shifts according to the issue at hand. In the context of climate change, Pakistani media tend to follow political narratives, resulting in reduced and reactive coverage.

Respondent # 6:

“Actually, about 25% of content for any media organization is provided by the government, but in Pakistan, 90% of the coverage is dedicated to political events. Climate change has never been a priority for any political party here. During Imran Khan's tenure, he launched the 'Billion Tree' campaign to plant trees, but other political parties criticized it. Besides that, no other party has worked on this issue, unlike in the U.S. or European countries, where climate change is part of their political manifestos. If Pakistani political parties also made climate change part of their agendas, like how they approach national interest projects, it could become a regular part of media coverage. For example, if a party initiated a climate change project and once out of power, the next ruling party would be obligated to continue it. This way, the media would also cover it since 90% of media coverage is dedicated to political parties and their activities. If climate change became a political issue, the media would naturally follow suit.”

Code # 2: Bandwagon Technique. In this competitive environment, smaller media organisations with limited resources to cover international events often rebroadcast coverage produced by global media conglomerates. When international media turn their attention to climate change and create a global impetus to address the issue, Pakistani media often follow suit, seeking to remain part of the informed media landscape. However, while Pakistani media may follow this global trend, they often fail to adequately inform their audiences about the potentially severe effects of climate change specific to Pakistan. Consequently, when major media channels in Pakistan decide to cover an issue, smaller outlets tend to follow suit, fearing a loss of audience.

Respondent # 5:

“Media works on the bandwagon technique for any new issue. If a political personality, government, or international agency creates a debate on a topic, our media will also give air space to that issue. However, if a topic is not part of another media's agenda, no other media will waste its energy highlighting it.”

Overall, the findings indicate that climate change does not emerge as an independent media priority in Pakistan. Instead, its visibility largely depends on political attention and international media trends. Since political issues dominate news agendas, climate change is usually covered only when it becomes part of political discourse or gains global attention. Once political focus shifts, media attention to climate change also declines. In this way, the media agenda tends to follow political priorities rather than shaping them, keeping climate change as a secondary and largely reactive topic in news coverage.

Theme # 7: Miscellaneous Issues

This theme encompasses a range of practical and structural challenges that also affect climate change reporting. These are not always direct policy issues, but they nonetheless strongly influence what receives coverage and what is overlooked.

Code # 1: Limited Space and Time. Media outlets depend heavily on advertising revenue and consistently prioritise political stories. They frequently cite time and space constraints to justify the lack of coverage of other important issues. A significant portion of their schedule is allocated to advertisements, which are essential for covering operational costs. Their second priority is to air

content that boosts ratings, while less commercially engaging issues — including climate change — are overlooked.

Respondent # 12:

“One of the factors is that our airtime is very expensive, and most of the content aired is paid. Our news coverage primarily happens when an event is actually occurring, but there isn't any thematic content related to climate change. We can't afford to dedicate 10 or 20 minutes daily for free content, but if we're talking about just a few seconds, then maybe it's possible. However, this hasn't been done yet. Since I don't have decision-making authority over media content, I can't say much about it. It's possible that the head office is considering it.”

Code # 2: Limited Resources of Information. The data also highlight a lack of resources for field reporting. Journalists often cannot travel to remote or affected areas due to budget constraints. Even when they do, they may face pressure or resistance from local powerful groups.

Respondent # 7:

“Look, if there's a climate change issue within the boundary of Islamabad, a reporter can reach there. However, the media lacks the resources to cover or report from remote areas. Furthermore, when a person goes into the field to gather information, they often face obstacles that created the issue in the first place. Correspondents in other cities are not paid, and since they are locals, they avoid conflicts with local influential people. These powerful individuals may attempt to cause financial or personal harm if reports are made against them, as they have connections with the government. Additionally, journalists often have limited background knowledge in climate change. However, when they visit the site, they can produce a good report through interviews with locals. Yes, but in climate change, journalists lack both training and education. Therefore, they cannot effectively frame the issues with regard to the actual backgrounds.”

Code # 3: Language Barriers. Climate change is a complex scientific issue involving specialised terminology used by environmentalists to explain its many dimensions. Pakistan lacks the financial resources to conduct independent, region-specific research and relies heavily on international studies. In the absence of qualified Urdu translators, complex scientific terms remain inaccessible to the general public. Furthermore, Pakistani media lacks reporters and anchors with sufficient scientific literacy to explain these terms effectively to their audiences.

Respondent # 3:

“Scientific knowledge is a challenge for our Urdu media because they don't have the proper Urdu translations for the terms used in climate change reporting. According to gatekeepers, it becomes difficult to explain these terms to the public and translating them into Urdu is also tough. Moreover, media organizations don't have reporters with expertise in scientific knowledge or climate change issues. While many people may be aware of climate change, when it comes to the scientific concepts, most are not familiar with them. And if there are any knowledgeable reporters, they are likely based in head offices in Lahore, Karachi, or Islamabad, covering those regions. Meanwhile, peripheral areas like Multan and Faisalabad, which are more affected, aren't getting enough news coverage.”

Code # 4: Conditional Focusing. Media outlets focus on climate change coverage only during major events such as floods, government policy announcements, COP summits, and particularly when developed countries announce climate pledges for vulnerable nations.

Respondent # 9:

“The commercialization issue is the biggest problem. At that time, it has become a core issue for the entire world, so we also must discuss it. Additionally, developing countries need to contribute to the pledges being made. When international conferences are held or policies are developed for all countries, we are bound to provide coverage for those as well. However, after such events, these issues tend to get sidelined in our country because the category that receives the most attention here is politics. Due to the focus on political content, issues like health, education, and the environment end up being neglected. We are not directly bound by the government in this regard, but the government does hold certain press conferences or shares data within media groups through seminars, creating a kind of hype through which Pakistan's vulnerability can be confirmed via the media. Apart from this, a certain momentum is built around the news presentation. However, there are no pre-planned media campaigns as such.”

The findings of this theme show that several practical and structural limitations further weaken climate change reporting in Pakistan. Limited airtime, financial constraints, a shortage of trained journalists, language barriers, and insufficient field resources collectively reduce the consistency of environmental coverage. As a result, climate change reporting remains mostly event-based and short-term, rather than continuous or analytical. These operational challenges collectively prevent media organisations from providing the in-depth and sustained coverage that a socially and environmentally significant issue such as climate change demands.

CONCLUSION

This study examined why climate change remains a marginalised issue in Pakistani media, despite its growing relevance to the country's environmental and social future. The research findings, based on in-depth interviews with journalists, indicate that climate change reporting is shaped by editorial priorities, lack of professional training, commercial pressures, and institutional routines practices.

The findings reveal that media coverage is driven by immediate events rather than long-term concerns. Climate-related stories typically gain attention only during disasters. This pattern reinforces the public perception that climate change is an episodic series of events rather than a continuous emergency. Moreover, dominant media framing tends to emphasise fear or blame rather than solutions or scientific explanation. As a result, public understanding and engagement with the issue remain limited.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with political economy of media theory, which explains how advertising dependence and corporate interests constrain editorial independence. Agenda-setting and framing theories further clarify how newsroom priorities and narrative choices determine which aspects of climate change become visible to the public. Additionally, institutional and newsroom culture pressures — such as the emphasis on ratings, speed, and visual appeal — reinforce the marginalisation of slow-onset environmental issues such as climate change. The study demonstrates that climate change reporting is shaped by more than individual journalists' choices. Structural limitations, newsroom routines, and financial pressures all play a critical role in shaping media content. To improve climate coverage, media organisations require greater investment in

journalist training, stronger editorial independence, and a reorientation of newsroom priorities toward climate stories that serve long-term public interests.

In summary, climate change communication is not merely a media issue; it is also a governance challenge with serious implications for Pakistan's social, economic, and environmental stability. If climate change continues to be treated as a marginal issue, the consequences will extend far beyond the newsroom. This study demonstrates that meaningful progress will only be possible if media institutions, policymakers, and regulators work together to recognise climate change as a central national issue and act accordingly. This study underscores the need for regular and sustained media coverage that builds public awareness and supports proactive responses, rather than reactive crisis reporting.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed to improve media communication on climate change. Media organisations should establish partnerships with universities, research institutes, and NGOs to access authentic data and expert analysis. They should engage language specialists to translate complex scientific concepts into Urdu and other regional languages, ensuring accessibility for wider audiences. In addition, media outlets should organise workshops and training sessions for journalists to strengthen their understanding of climate science and climate reporting. To reduce financial dependence, media outlets should explore alternative funding sources, donor support, and public interest programming to ensure editorial independence. Political will and support play a crucial role in integrating environmental issues into the societal mainstream. Environmental issues should therefore be linked to governance and accountability in media coverage, enabling them to enter the political debate. Media outlets should also engage influencers and community voices to build effective platforms for climate change awareness campaigns. The Climate Change Ministry should share factual data and policy updates with media outlets and encourage them to designate dedicated climate correspondents, rather than treating climate reporting as a secondary beat.

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