

# PROMOTIONAL CAPTURE: ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM AND COMPETING EPISTEMOLOGIES OF LAHORE SMOG COVERAGE ON YOUTUBE

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## Abstract

The epistemic construction of environmental crises on YouTube in developing countries remains poorly understood. This study investigates how competing Pakistani YouTube channels construct, justify, and communicate environmental knowledge about Lahore's annual smog crisis, an area that, to the best of researcher's knowledge, no published research has examined through an epistemological lens. Drawing on Ekström and Westlund's (2019) epistemologies of digital journalism framework and a non-reactive qualitative document analysis of 35 videos, the study compares Dawn News English (an institutional legacy newsroom) and Discover Pakistan (a lifestyle infotainment network). Dawn anchors truth claims in independent quantification, expert testimony, and structural recurrence; Discover Pakistan validates claims through official access, enforcement spectacle, and citizen gratitude. The data surface patterns suggestive of what is provisionally termed promotional capture, a sensitizing concept, not an established construct, in which creator-style affective authenticity appears fused with provincial government publicity, displacing environmental accountability in favour of solution-celebration. The results suggest potential application to institutional environmental journalism capacity in Pakistan, independent AQI dashboards, and increased public disclosure as to government-aligned digital environmental communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Lahore smog crisis seems to reoccur each winter with sickening regularity. The Air Quality Index of the city is routinely over 300, and it was already in the hazardous range, and even higher, 500 on several occasions (IQAir, 2026). Schools shut down, hospitals are overrun with respiratory patients and emergency measures are running through their routine of familiarity. In 2025, Pakistan was ranked the most polluted country in the world, its PM2.5 concentrations in the country of  $67.3 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ , almost 14 times the guideline on

PM2.5 set by the World Health Organization, and Lahore was ranked among the most polluted major cities in the world (IQAir, 2026). Pakistan has one of the largest air-pollution burdens in the world: it is estimated that 128,000 premature deaths per year are caused by outdoor air pollution, and the concentration of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) in Lahore is always one of the highest compared to any major city in the world (Health Effects Institute, 2025; IQAir, 2026). Air pollution has caused the Pakistani

economy around four percent of GDP per year (World Bank, 2016). Although the extent of this crisis is huge, the structural weakness of Pakistani environmental journalism is still poorly-positioned to convey it regularly (Ejaz et al., 2022; Qusien and Robbins, 2023). The coverages of smog are also on YouTube with growing percentages of Pakistani audiences accessing it annually, as opposed to the print or terrestrial television. What are the types of knowledge that they have there? The given question prompts the current research.

The video-first platform, with YouTube being a key player, has taken the centre stage in the digital media diet of Pakistan, a nation that boasts about 130 million internet users at the outset of 2026 (Kemp, 2026). Pakistan's legacy news industry has navigated a decade of economic contraction, advertising volatility, and an uneven digital transition in which newsroom connectivity consistently outpaced newsroom digital capability (Jamil, 2023). Institutional newsrooms are being pushed onto third-party platforms they do not govern at precisely the moment that agile infotainment operations have mastered the grammar of those same platforms (Jamil, 2023; Profit, 2023).

The stakes of this squeeze become acute in the domain of environmental journalism. Media representations of environmental risk constitute the principal public arena in which hazards acquire political urgency and civic meaning (Boykoff, 2011; Hansen, 2011; Schäfer & Painter, 2021). Pakistani environmental journalism has long been diagnosed as under-resourced, under-prioritised, and short of specialised beat reporters (Ejaz et al., 2022; Qusien & Robbins, 2023). Recent work has documented how smog coverage in legacy print media strains under seasonal and episodic framings (Qusien, 2026). To the best of researcher's knowledge, no published study has compared the epistemic practices of an institutional newsroom and an infotainment network covering the same environmental crisis on the same platform in Pakistan. The epistemic consequences of this platformized environmental communication remain unexamined.

Following Ekström and Westlund (2019), the present article treats this competition not merely as an organisational or commercial problem but as an epistemological one, a contest over how public truth about the environment is articulated, justified, and accepted once journalism is dislocated onto platforms it does not own. The contest is intensified by the wider affective turn in digital news, through which emotion has migrated from the periphery of journalistic practice to the centre of its distribution logics (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020). Because the study adopts an exploratory qualitative interpretive design, hypothesis testing was not intended; instead, three research questions guide the analysis:

RQ1: How do Dawn News English and Discover Pakistan articulate truth claims about the Lahore smog crisis in their YouTube output?

RQ2: Through which justification practices does each channel validate those claims?

RQ3: What audience-facing credibility-positioning mechanics and circulation patterns are visible in each channel's formats and registers?

The study makes three contributions. First, it offers, to researcher's knowledge, the first comparative epistemic analysis of environmental video journalism on YouTube in Pakistan, bringing four previously separate research literatures into analytical dialogue: Pakistani institutional credibility, environmental journalism, digital newsroom labour, and YouTube cultures. Second, it contributes toward extending the epistemologies of digital journalism framework, developed primarily with reference to Northern newsrooms, toward Global South video infotainment contexts. Third, it introduces *promotional capture* as a sensitizing concept, a preliminary analytical lens warranting systematic empirical testing, not an established theoretical claim.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Platformization and the Native Unbundling of Public-Interest News

Platformization describes the penetration of the economic, infrastructural, and governance logics of digital platforms into the production of culture

and information (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Platforms accomplish this penetration while presenting themselves as neutral intermediaries, a discursive positioning that systematically obscures their curatorial power over what circulates (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018), reconfiguring what Klinger and Svensson (2015) term network media logic in ways that increasingly supersede the broadcast logic of professional journalism. The journalism-specific effect is the transformation of the social media journalism as an external referral system to a closed native content system (Hendrickx & Ogenhaffen, 2024). In this structure, the journalistic product has to be completely decoupled of its institutional setting and re-engineered to present its full informational content in the feed, where it has to compete on the same algorithmic grounds with entertainment and branded content (Degen et al., 2024). Publishers get into such arrangements at a structural disadvantage, relying on mediators who do not provide them with any stability or transparency (Bell and Owen 2017; Nielsen and Ganter 2018). In Global South eco systems, where viewers bypassed the desktop news sites and went directly. In Global South ecosystems, where audiences leapfrogged desktop news websites and arrived directly on mobile video platforms, native unbundling increasingly constitutes the public information space itself (Kemp, 2026; Yusuf, 2013). What remains underexamined is whether the epistemological character of content that circulates through these infrastructures is systematically different, and, in the environmental domain, consequentially so.

### **2.2 Creator Economies, Parasocial Relations, and Affective Authenticity**

The rise of creator economies has restructured who is legitimated to perform journalism-like work, with legacy journalism and social media converging under platform capitalism as independent creators monetise audience relationships directly (Salamon et al., 2026). The currency of that monetisation is authenticity, the performance of being 'really real,' relatable, and unscripted that Cunningham and Craig (2017) identify as the foundational brand culture of social

media entertainment. Authenticity work succeeds because it activates parasocial interaction: the audience's experience of an intimate, face-to-face relationship with a media persona first theorised by Horton and Wohl (1956) and intensified by the interactive affordances of digital platforms. Internet-celebrity research has since revealed how systematically that intimacy is manufactured; calibrated amateurism, behind-the-scenes access, and direct address are crafted precisely so that they read as unmediated (Abidin, 2018). In this space, affect is not something that surrounds the information but the glue with which the publics are constructed, with which claims become felt plausible (Papacharissi, 2014). The industry-level data supports the drift: today, the audiences of various markets are attracted to individual hosts and creators as much as they are to institutional brands, and for those who have less trust in the news made by institutions, the sources which focus on personalities are overrepresented (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Reuters Institute to the Study of Journalism, 2025). The amount of time spent on social platforms peaked in the year around 2022 and has since decreased in a steady stream, which behavioural data of over a quarter of a million adults in fifty countries can prove (Burn-Murdoch, 2025), but the dynamics of creator-economy have continued to influence what content is featured in the feeds of social platforms.

### **2.3 The Quality Trap in Attentional Architectures**

What platform logics devalue is not incidental to institutional journalism but constitutive of it. Objectivity emerged historically as the profession's core occupational norm (Schudson, 2001) and operates in daily practice as a strategic ritual of verification, attribution, and balance through which journalists defend their knowledge claims against contestation (Tuchman, 1972). Together, these norms underwrite journalistic authority as a distinct and socially recognised mode of knowledge production (Carlson, 2017). The structural tension confronting institutional newsrooms on platforms is therefore what Degen et al. (2024) characterise as a quality trap: in a comprehensive cross-platform review, they

demonstrate that attributes professional journalists treat as quality, accuracy, multi-source verification, contextual completeness, are poorly aligned with what deep-learning recommendation algorithms reward, namely emotional arousal, high posting frequency, and watch-time retention. Attempting to mimic creator conventions risks liquidating the distinctiveness that justifies an institutional newsroom's existence (Degen et al., 2024; Salamon et al., 2026). This dilemma is one expression of journalism's wider epistemic crisis in which datafied distribution strains source-critical routines (Steensen, 2019; Waisbord, 2018), whether platform-circulating content systematically displaces verification-based environmental reporting is the animating question the present study pursues.

#### **2.4 Environmental Journalism: Theoretical Anchors and Global South Challenges**

The field-specific theoretical grounding of environmental journalism scholarship can offer the lack of which platformization and creator-economy literature cannot provide. Research on environmental communication has identified that news media are not merely reporting on the environmental risk but actually form the social and political meaning of this risk, defining how the population perceives causal responsibility, severity and how institutional response to the risk should be (Boykoff, 2011; Hansen, 2011; Schaefer and Painter, 2021). The relative significance of specific problem properties, causes, moral judgments, and solutions in news texts has been of central concern here: the frame which selectively highlights and downplays certain attributes of the problem, its causes, and the evaluation of moral judgments and solutions, systematically orientate audience interpretation towards some interpretations and away from others (Entman, 1993; Nisbet, 2009). Previous studies on environmental framing have revealed that the use of responsabilisation and crisis frames has a higher likelihood of encouraging civic participation than the techno-optimistic solution frames (Carvalho, 2007; Cox & Pezzullo, 2015; Moser, 2010). One of the enduring misappropriations of mainstream reporting is that of false balance that creates a

sense of parity between scientific mainstream and minority sceptical views (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004). The systems of South Asian journalism such as Bangladesh and Pakistan are complexly constrained by structural limitations of thin resources, episodic framing, and dependence on official sources to influence the coverage of environmental issues in contrast to Northern patterns (Painter, 2014; Shaikh and Obaidullah, 2026). In this light, whether the smog of Lahore is discussed as a structural governance failure or technological challenge being successfully tackled is a neutral editorial decision but an epistemically and politically consequential action.

In Pakistan, in particular, the material of environmental beats in a newsroom is also sparse, and there is a lack of specialization training and poor competitiveness of the subject in terms of editorial attention (Ejaz et al., 2022; Ittefaq et al., 2021; Qusien and Robbins, 2023). According to Qusien (2026), legacy smog coverage is still a matter of episodic coverage and not structural. These deficits are complicated as opposed to being solved by the platform environment.

#### **2.5 Pakistani Digital Media: Four Research Tracks and the Synthesis Gap**

The Pakistani communication scholarship that can be applied in this problem has evolved in four main avenues that are pretty much independent of each other and have left a part of the problem unexplored. First, comparative work has since explored how the news agenda of Daily Dawn, which is the unambiguous English-language newspaper of record in Pakistan, characterized by editorial independence and verification-oriented professional culture (Yusuf, 2013), differs between that of social platforms, with studies mapping out the agenda of both news outlets (Soomro et al., 2023). Second, structural limitations to Pakistani environmental reporting have been reported in the literature based on interview, including the thin resources, low beat prestige, and the lack of specialist training (Ejaz et al., 2022; Ittefaq et al., 2021; Qusien and Robbins, 2023). Third, Jamil (2023) reports a second-order digital divide within the Pakistani newsrooms, with organizations getting connected at a higher rate than journalists

getting the skills and institutional resources to productively use it. Fourth, Cheema (2025) reveals the way in which the media environment of the country is being redefined by the use of YouTube podcasting, with creators utilizing authenticity practices and parasocial address to establish sustainable audiences that are not based on traditional structures. A synthesis gap is revealed in reading the four tracks together, which is bridged in the present study.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Epistemologies of Digital Journalism

The research is placed in the framework of the epistemologies of digital journalism, developed by Ekström and Westlund (2019), which builds on the previous tradition of interpreting journalism as a knowledge-producing institution, whose claims to truth are structured in a different way across media forms (Ekström, 2002). The framework theorizes the displacement of news journalism: the structural situation where the publishers are being reliant on the platforms that they do not own, and have an impact on the production, justification, and validation of journalistic knowledge. It identifies three dimensions of analysis: articulated knowledge and truth claims (the registers and discursive forms in which content presents itself as accurately describing reality); justification in journalism practice (the professional practices, sources and validation strategies used to justify those claims); and acceptance or rejection of claims (the audience facing cognitive and emotive processes used to certify information as credible or dismiss it as unreliable).

This framework is methodologically better than classical ones due to three considerations. The gatekeeping theory assumes that there is institutional control of distribution gates; in YouTube the exposure is controlled by the algorithmic infrastructure. The epistemologies model considers trust as a communicative practice that can be observed but not a single attitudinal variable, which allows systematically analysing the text (Bowen, 2009; Ekström and Westlund, 2019).

#### 3.2 Two Epistemic Repertoires

The framework supplies the core conceptual contrast the case demands. An epistemology of *institutional objectivity* warrants claims through impersonal professional procedure and organisational authority: the strategic ritual of multi-source verification, attributed quotation, and balanced representation that has historically constituted journalistic credibility (Carlson, 2017; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972). An epistemology of *affective authenticity* warrants claims through visible personalisation, relational proximity, and emotional resonance: the parasocial intimacy, technological demonstration, and conversational directness that constitute creator credibility (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Papacharissi, 2014). These are ideal-typical repertoires, heuristic poles rather than essences.

#### 3.3 Promotional Capture: A Sensitizing Concept

A sensitizing concept, a general orientation rather than a definitive description (Blumer, 1954), is introduced as a theoretical possibility to be explored rather than confirmed in advance: *promotional capture*. Drawing provisionally on Stockmann's (2013) evidence that entertainment outlets can serve state legitimation without announcing themselves as propaganda, and on calls to theorise datafied media power from the Global South (Milan & Treré, 2019), the term tentatively names a configuration in which affective creator-style authenticity fuses with state publicity. Whether this is present in the data is an empirical question, not a prior assumption, and the concept is offered as a sensitizing lens rather than a validated construct. Three adjacent concepts require distinction. Journalism that focuses on development is purposefully anticipatory of national development as a normative editorial position (Xiaoge, 2009); journalism that claims to be advocacy journalism does not hide its position (Waisbord, 2009); and state propaganda, which can be described as institutional, deliberate and highly organized persuasion in the service of the agency producing it (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2019), is actually produced by the state apparatus. The case of

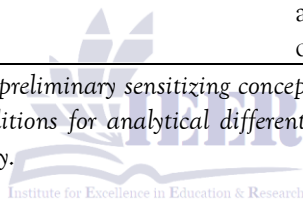
promotional capture, in being substantiated, would be different than all of the three: the channel seems to be structurally autonomous but epistemically a means of governmental discourse.

The boundary condition, that is not subject to promotional capture occurs when channels that are structurally independent have critical distance even when using affective formats.

**Table 1. Promotional capture distinguished from adjacent concepts.**

Concept	Producer independence	Relation to state	Epistemic function	Transparency of alignment
Development journalism	Institutionally independent	Supportive (normative)	Progress framing	Declared editorial stance (Xiaoge, 2009)
Advocacy journalism	Independent or partisan	Variable	Persuasion toward cause	Openly declared (Waisbord, 2009)
Strategic communication / public diplomacy	State or institutional actor	Direct	Legitimation and image management	Source identifiable (Coombs & Holladay, 2014)
State-sponsored media	State-owned controlled	/ Direct	Institutional legitimation	Ownership disclosed (Stockmann, 2013)
Promotional capture (this study, provisional)	Appears structurally independent	Aligned without commission	Solution-celebration; accountability displaced	Alignment concealed or unmarked

Note. Promotional capture is presented as a preliminary sensitizing concept grounded in this single-case study. The table operationalises necessary and sufficient conditions for analytical differentiation and is offered as a scaffold for future empirical testing, not as a validated taxonomy.



**Table 2. Distinguishing promotional framing from promotional capture: a preliminary operationalization.**

Analytical dimension	Promotional framing	Promotional capture (provisional threshold)
Structural independence	Channel structurally independent	Channel structurally independent (key difference from state propaganda)
Source diversity	Moderate; multiple official voices	Low; predominantly single agency or administration
Counter-narrative access	Occasional dissent tolerated	Staged for official rebuttal; no independently sourced counter-voice
Accountability framing	Mixed; crisis acknowledged alongside response	Absent or displaced by solution-certainty
Temporal narrative	Episodic problem with official response	Sustained breakthrough-and-closure arc
Affective register	Informational with celebratory elements	Parasocial celebration as primary epistemic warrant

Note. This table is a provisional analytical scaffold, not a validated measurement instrument. The thresholds are theoretically asserted, not empirically validated; they are offered for future systematic testing. The podcast item partially disconfirms a maximalist reading (Section 5.3).

*Table 3. Analytical framework: from platformization to the emergence of promotional capture (schematic sequence).*

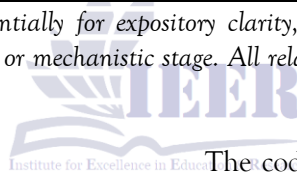
Step	Process	Theoretical grounding
1	Platformization: native unbundling of news; algorithm governs distribution	Nieborg & Poell (2018); Hendrickx & Opgenhaffen (2024)
2	Competing epistemic repertoires: institutional objectivity vs affective authenticity	Ekström & Westlund (2019)
3	Justification practices: verification & expertise vs official access & demonstration	Tuchman (1972); Carlson (2017)
4	Circulation mechanics: institutional anchoring (lower) vs parasocial celebration (higher); view counts = reach, not acceptance	Covington et al. (2016); Tandoc et al. (2018)
5	Promotional capture? (sensitizing concept only) Creator-style affect + state narrative. Boundary: independent channels maintaining critical distance	Stockmann (2013); Xiaoge (2009)

*Note.* These dimensions are analysed sequentially for expository clarity, not presented as a causal chain. Each step represents an analytical lens, not a temporal or mechanistic stage. All relationships are interpretive within a qualitative document analysis design.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

It uses qualitative analysis of documents (non-reactive) as a research design (Altheide and Schneider, 2013). QDA approaches publicly available media artefacts, as documents that can be analysed in a systematic and iterative fashion in terms of sampling, coding and interpretation; since they are created to serve other purposes, they are instead immune to the social desirability effects that plague practitioner interviews (Bowen, 2009). In an institutionally sensitive media landscape in Pakistan, an empirical documentation of epistemic practice in lieu of espoused practice can be achieved by analysing the channels that published, which constitute an empirical account of the practice of epistemic publishing (Jamil, 2023). Qualitative designs similar to this kind are based on the criteria of trustworthiness credibility, dependability and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Yardley, 2000) and not on statistical representativeness.



The coding design is single-analyst coding which aligns with interpretive QDA and reflexive thematic analysis, where intercoder reliability tests make the misrepresentation instead of the strengthening of hermeneutic rigor (Braun and Clarke, 2019); transparency is obtained by audit trails and systematic reporting of disconfirming evidence. No human subjects were used in the study; there was no need to have ethical approval.

### 4.2 Platform Boundary

YouTube is one of the most popular digital platforms in Pakistan and doubles as a repository of broadcast media and the main location of digital-native video in the nation (Kemp, 2026), and has been established as a research location on its own (Arthurs et al., 2018; Burgess and Green, 2018). Second, architectural salience: YouTube is a hybrid search engine and a recommender system with explicit objectives of watch-time retention (Covington et al., 2016) and ranking the content cultures by actively regulating their competitive

visibility (Rieder et al., 2018). Third, methodological control: format and recommendation environment are kept constant by limiting the analysis to YouTube, and any differences between observed are because of epistemic decisions, and not the technological difference (Hendrickx and Vazquez-Herrero, 2024). Fourth, stability of the archives: YouTube stores uploads and metadata as publicly accessible data, which allows non-reactive data capture to be reproduced (Altheide and Schneider, 2013).

#### 4.3 Case Selection

The cases were chosen selectively (Patton, 2002) so as to instantiate epistemic archetypes as maximally contrasting as possible, in a highly restricted topical area. This information-based approach capitalizes on the ability of polar cases to disclose about a phenomenon, then would actual cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The independent media-credibility mapping (Yusuf, 2013; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2025) and Discover Pakistan channel metadata declare itself as the infotainment orientation of their own channel. The exclusion of Geo News, ARY Digital and Hum News was due to their coverage of smog being largely framed in the context of partisan political struggle that would confound the design that will intentionally bracket. To maximize the analytical contrast, the polar-case design was used; experiments in future should have hybrid channels to check the limits of the concept.

Dawn News English is the institutional pole, the English-language newspaper of record in Pakistan, which is characterized by editorial autonomy and culture of verification (Soomro et al., 2023; Yusuf, 2013), and has a specific environmental video strand and hard-news smog coverage.

Discover Pakistan is the infotainment pole, a so-called satellite tourism channel that was created to market tourism and national image, which is an example of digital-native infotainment operations, based on creator mechanics and targeted at mass platform viewers (Jamil, 2023; Profit, 2023).

#### 4.4 Corpus Construction and Data Collection

The collection of data was done in two levels. The layer one is the metadata corpus: 35 smog related videos (Dawn News English, n = 16; Discover Pakistan, n = 19) found by systematic within-channel keyword searches, based on the English keywords, smog, air pollution, Lahore, AQI, and the Urdu equivalent, دھند, and stored using a structured manual metadata-capture protocol (Altheide, 1987; Altheide and Schneider, 2013). This stratum is a census of eligible content: there were no other similar videos that these channels offered within the study period. The date of upload of all the corpus is around November 2022 to February 2026.

The transcribed analytic subcorpus is layer two: eight videos (four per channel) that were sampled according to three purposive criteria: (a) topicality: the smog item must be central to the Lahore smog crisis; (b) format diversity: the item must be a hard news piece, a long-form expert explainer, a judicial interview, a field enforcement reporting, and a podcasting piece; and (c) engagement salience: the most viewed smog item of each channel must be included. The subcorpus is described in table 4. The logic of information power is reflected in the depth-over-breadth balance: a small but information-rich and purposely diverse set of cases is more analytically productive and sufficiently adequate to study objectives, as well as case richness, than a larger one (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016).

All the videos were transcribed word-to-word and translated into Urdu language and code-switching phrases into English by using the meaning maintaining protocol (Temple and Young, 2004). The lead author, a native speaker of Urdu, did the translation; a bilingual research assistant read all passages that were translated independently and three words that needed semantic negotiation were solved by the use of back-translation and discussion till a common agreement was achieved (Temple & Young, 2004). All the material analysed is publicly broadcasted content, there were no human participants.

**Table 4. Transcribed analytic subcorpus.**

Channel	Video (abbreviated title)	Format	Duration	Views
Dawn English	News Why Lahore's Air Keeps Getting Worse- Pakistan's Smog Crisis Explained	Long-form expert explainer	26:43	4.4K
Dawn English	News From Smog to Solutions: Justice Jawad Hassan on Lahore's Air Emergency	Judicial interview	9:13	373
Dawn English	News Toxic Smog Chokes Lahore as AQI Hits 398- Health Emergency	Hard-news report	crisis 3:03	1.5K
Dawn English	News Why Pakistan Can't Escape Its Smog Problem	Structural essay	video 4:44	1K
Discover Pakistan	World First AI Powered Smog Machines Launched in Lahore	Field enforcement feature	/ 15:59	33K
Discover Pakistan	Punjab Leads the Way with AI Surveillance, Smart Drones, Green Energy	Government achievement feature	6:31	25K
Discover Pakistan	Lahore's Smog: Artificial Rain Solution? - Zoom In with Rameen	Host-led programme	special 25:01	2.4K
Discover Pakistan	Anti-Smog Guns Experiment in Lahore- Ft Ahmad Sagheer- Podcast	Studio podcast	27:20	599

#### 4.5 Analytical Protocol

Thematic analysis of transcripts and metadata used the six-phase process of Braun and Clarke (2006) which was done in a reflexive manner as opposed to a mechanical checklist (Braun and Clarke, 2019): familiarization, initial code generation, theme construction, review, definition, and reporting. There were three sequential passes in the coding. Isolated surface

communicative markers, such as person and address forms, quantification practices, types of source attribution, evidentiary displays, and temporal framings are only revealed during a first, semantic pass. These markers were further grouped in a second, axial run, into higher-order groups, in contrasting the institutional verification routines with creator-economy mechanics. The categories that were achieved were mapped onto

three dimensions of the Ekstrom and Westlund (2019) framework by a third, theoretical pass. First-order codes representative and axial groupings are given in Table 6 with the exemplar evidence in Table 5. The engagement metrics were descriptively used in all cases, as indicative signals of different audience acceptance, and not to make a statistical inference.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Attention Asymmetry and Titling Strategies in the Metadata Corpus

The metadata layer determines the competitive environment, in which the epistemic comparison is placed. The three most-viewed Discover Pakistan smog items, the anti-smog machines feature (33,000 views), the AI-surveillance feature (25,000 views) and an industrial-expo special (20,000 views) each garnered about four to eight times the level of viewership of the most-viewed smog item on Dawn, the 26-minute expert explainer (4,300 views). This asymmetry of circulation has been linked to (but not causally due to) the differences in epistemic repertoires, subscriber base, timing of uploads, selection of thumbnails, and history of being recommended all influence the number of views and cannot be decoupled by the metadata alone.

Title semantics part ways in the anticipation of the more profound epistemic opposition. The names of the titles of Dawn fill a crisis vocabulary: toxic Smog Chokes Lahore, Hazardous Levels, AQI measurements, Why Pakistan Can't Escape Its Smog Problem. The titles of Discover Pakistan take up a solution-celebration vocabularies, prefiguring novelty, technology, and official success: World First AI Powered Anti-Smog Machines, Punjab Leads the Way, Smog Less Punjab, Citizens Got Relief, Public Applaud CM. Thumbnail composition reinforces this dichotomy (Cheema, 2025). A single observation is worth mentioning: the most institutionally challenging product of Dawn, the 26-minute, multi-expert explainer, is its best-performing product, which supports the idea that institutional content performs worse, rather than being unpromised by the platform (Degen et al., 2024).

### 5.2 Articulated Truth Claims: Two Registers of Environmental Reality (RQ1)

Throughout the transcribed subcorpus, the production of Dawn continually forms the smog as a quantifiable, repetitive and structurally generated state. The narration is disengaged and third-person and is based on quantification and framed by a regime of recurrence-despite-intervention:

“Even with the court orders, emergency plans, and temporary shutdowns, the haze has returned every winter, worse than ever. The reason is simple. We treat air pollution as an annual inconvenience not a national emergency”. (Dawn News English, explainer)

Numbers are used as epistemic anchors in general. AQI of 398 is also reported as well as its real-life impact: respiratory hospital cases in a designated Lahore hospital that it tripled. This has been blamed on the transport sector which contributes approximately 40% of air pollutants. The structural essay solidifies the register into aphorism, it pays to stay dirty and smog isn't just a weather problem. It's a governance problem and claims that it is systemically caused and not naturally or seasonally inevitable. The court interview provides a citation apparatus not common in video journalism, the name of a case law and a law: the Anjum Irfan v. LDA case, the Sheikh Asim Farooq case, the section 15 of the environmental protection act (1997) of Pakistan and the motor vehicle emission regulations (2013).

Discover Pakistan is a reconstruction of a wholly different version of the same winters. It tells a first-person plural and second person inclusive story; it is framed temporally as a breakthrough/closure; and its cause is the provincial executive as opposed to systemic failure:

“Lahore, atmosphere, changing: The atmosphere of Lahore is changing, but not only the weather has changed, the system has changed as well, said the vision and strategy of the Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz (anti-smog machines feature). A smog War Room, which is engaged in a long-term battle, drones which perform thermal imaging, 8,500 CCTV cameras looking at chimneys, AI machines at scale, which are the

world first. Closure (rather than recurrence) is the story destination: "The new Punjab is the air, the new Punjab is the clean air, the clear atmosphere, the breathing that is safe and unpolluted, and the new Punjab is the new Punjab."

### 5.3 Justification Practices: Verification versus Demonstration (RQ2)

The truth claims of the channels are justified by the different and asymmetric processes. Dawn defends itself by independent expertise as well as triangulation. Its explainer gathers a credentialed climatic-policy professional, economist and hospital doctors, all none of them state actors. The professional demolishes the myths (that smog is a fifth season, it is caused by farmers or India) and then relocates the problem of pollution as a structural development problem year-round. The economist defies cosy scripts in front of the camera, and emphasizes that until and unless you make sure that the laws are observed, then nothing much can be done and that there is no institutional ability to manage air-quality in Pakistan. Most importantly, the internal source of judicial authority of the channel in question is also implicitly disciplined: the climate-policy expert points at the fact that it is not the courts that should project the executive voids, which is why the high-profile judicial interviewee of the channel turns out to be a symptom of a failed state rather than its remedy. The evidentiary logic is organized with an independent verification and counter-claim, which is acted as a strategic ritual (Degen et al., 2024; Ekström and Westlund, 2019; Tuchman, 1972).

The access and demonstration is justified by discover Pakistan. Its legitimacy is based on its closeness to officialdom: the Punjab Environment Secretary was interviewed in the Smog War Room, EPA officers were telling their stories and showing their raids on the factory on camera, a deputy director was making a live inspection. Evidence is in the form of visible enforcement spectacle, a steel mill shut, 860 brick kilns destroyed, 236 inspections in a day, live chimney feeds on display in a control room, as opposed to independent corroboration of environmental results. Citizen testimony serves as social evidence, and is

unanimously appreciative: we are very grateful to Maryam Nawaz to have made this initiative; it is not often in the history of Pakistan that one could have seen such a leader personally engaged. The podcast format, however, is a partial refutation: the guest admits of anti-smog guns, "they can work, but I do not believe that it could be so effective.

### 5.4 Circulation Mechanics and the Parasocial Premium (RQ3)

Circulation and not epistemic acceptance is measured by view counts (Tandoc et al., 2018), and this section concerns format and register credibility-positioning strategies, rather than proven audience reactions. To gain credibility, Dawn uses institutional anchoring: brand authority, credential announcement (climate and development policy expert, economist, and host of All Things Money, named hospitals, and case law, as well as the tacit assertion that the newspaper of record approval culture is in place) (Soomro et al., 2023; Yusuf, 2013). Discover Pakistan requests acceptance by affective propinquity: hosts take the viewer through war rooms and factory gates (Let us take a closer look), speak to the audience as friends and talk to them as peers, and perform the desirable affective pose by having on-camera citizens to script the desirable response of gratitude, a textbook parasocial mechanic (Abidin, 2018; Cunningham and Craig, 2017; Horton and Wohl, 1956).

The circulation asymmetry documented in Section 5.1 is associated with what might be termed a *parasocial circulation premium*: on a watch-time-optimised platform (Covington et al., 2016; Rieder et al., 2018), the celebratory, host-led, technologically spectacular repertoire coincides with four to eight times the reach of the quantified, multi-sourced, recurrence-framed one. This is a descriptive observation of *exposure patterns* only, not a measure of audience trust, belief, credibility judgement, or persuasion (Tandoc et al., 2018).

### 5.5 Promotional Capture: When Affective Authenticity Meets State Publicity

The most consequential pattern challenges an assumption embedded in creator-economy

scholarship: that affective authenticity belongs to independent creators (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Salamon et al., 2026). In this corpus, the affective repertoire appears fused with provincial government publicity. Discover Pakistan’s smog coverage names the Chief Minister as the visionary agent in multiple features, embeds official rebuttals to criticism, closes on the teleological promise of a "new Punjab," and packages enforcement statistics supplied by the agencies being covered as self-evident evidence of efficacy.

This pattern is provisionally termed here *promotional capture*, a tentative analytical proposition, not a validated theoretical construct. What the corpus suggests is an apparent harnessing of creator-style authenticity to state narrative, such that the platform-native epistemic alternative to institutional journalism appears pre-aligned with power. Its indicative signature is the systematic displacement of accountability by solution-certainty. Table 5 consolidates the comparative matrix across all three epistemic dimensions, with verbatim exemplars.

**Table 5. Comparative epistemic matrix across the three dimensions of Ekström and Westlund (2019), with verbatim exemplars from the transcribed subcorpus.**

Epistemic dimension	Dawn News English (institutional objectivity)	Discover Pakistan (affective authenticity)
Linguistic register	Detached, third-person, interrogative of severity: "how bad is it really?"; aphoristic structural diagnosis: "it pays to stay dirty."	Inclusive, second-person, demonstrative: "Let us take a closer look"; transformational: "the system has changed as well."
Quantification & evidence	AQI 398; caseloads "tripled"; transport "about 40%" of pollutants; statutory citations (Environmental Protection Act, 1997, Section 15; motor vehicle emission regulations, 2013).	Enforcement counts as spectacle: "860 brick kilns" demolished; "236 inspections" in 24 hours; 8,500 cameras; "world first" AI machines.
Justification basis	Independent expertise and triangulation; on-camera myth correction; sources permitted to undercut official narratives.	Official access and demonstration; agency-supplied statistics; staged rebuttal of criticism of the Chief Minister.
Temporal narrative	Recurrence despite intervention: "the haze returns every winter, worse than before."	Breakthrough and closure: "this is the new Punjab"; "this year conditions are much better."
Audience positioning	Citizen as evaluator of institutional performance; credentialed strangers as epistemic warrant.	Citizen as grateful witness: "we are very thankful to Maryam Nawaz"; host as parasocial guide.

**Table 6. Representative coding schema: first-order codes and axial categories.**

First-order code (examples)	Axial category	Epistemic dimension (Ekström & Westlund, 2019)
Numerical AQI citation; named hospital; case-law citation; expert credential announcement	Quantification and independent expertise	Articulated knowledge / Justification
Myth-correction opening move; on-camera counter-narrative by sources; recurrence framing	Verification and counter-claim ritual	Justification

Chief Minister named as visionary agent; enforcement statistics from agency sources; staged rebuttal	Official-access demonstration	Justification / Articulated knowledge
Second-person address ("Let us"); citizen gratitude scripts; host as guide	Parasocial and relational proximity	Acceptance mechanics
Breakthrough closure ("this is the new Punjab"); solution-certainty framing (potential promotional-capture indicators)	Government-congruent narrative / Potential promotional-capture indicators	Articulated knowledge / Acceptance mechanics

6. Discussion

Interpreted through the epistemologies of digital journalism framework, the findings suggest an asymmetric epistemic competition. On the dimension of articulated knowledge, the two channels construct incompatible environmental realities from the same city and the same winters, a recurrent structural governance failure versus a transformation under competent executive command. On the dimension of justification, an expensive verification repertoire confronts an inexpensive demonstration repertoire whose evidentiary inputs are largely supplied by the agencies under coverage. On the dimension of credibility-positioning, the celebratory and parasocial mechanics coincide with roughly four to eight times the reach of institutional anchoring within this corpus, a descriptive association that cannot be attributed causally to epistemic repertoire differences alone, given the multiple confounds of subscriber base, upload frequency, and recommendation history detailed in Section 4.3. This pattern indicates what the quality trap literature would predict in a Global South key (Degen et al., 2024): the attributes that make Dawn’s environmental coverage epistemically robust, multi-sourcing, quantification, counter-claim, are precisely those that slow production and withhold the emotional closure that watch-time-optimised recommendation systems reward (Covington et al., 2016; Rieder et al., 2018).

The promotional capture pattern, if replicated in future studies, may complicate creator-economy theory in a direction the Northern literature does not anticipate. That literature situates the creator as an independent economic actor whose

authenticity capital is accumulated in structural opposition to institutions (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Salamon et al., 2026). It is to be noted here that other hybrid media systems have been found to be more helpful to state legitimation, using commercialised, entertainment-driven outlets, as opposed to state organs where the output does not proclaim itself as publicity (Chadwick, 2013; Stockmann, 2013). That variant of the dynamic, which is known as platform-era, creator-grammar, is tentatively called promotional (Stockmann, 2013). This is put forward as a preliminary argument based on a single case and a single platform; it asserts its plausibility as a sensitizing notion that requires systematic inquiry in other settings, especially in Global South media systems where platforms are spilled out into settings not subject to the regulatory traditions of such practices in Northern settings (Blumer, 1954; Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Milan and Treré, 2019).

Competing interpretations should be given a chance. It is possible that the increased number of views per Discover Pakistan is actually indicative of the size of its subscriber base, the frequency of uploads or the number of recommendations, but not the epistemic repertoire. The solution-celebration register can even be used to fulfil actual audience requirements; active government communication can create itself enforcement videotape, which is merely reported in the information entertainment channels. Recognition of these options makes the finding analytically consequential: the difference in epistemic repertoires has an analytically consequential

contribution to the circulation asymmetry but this design cannot determine its causal contribution. For environmental communication in Pakistan, the practical implications are direct though appropriately modest given the single-case design. Qusien and Robbins (2023) document newsrooms too thinly resourced to sustain specialist environmental beats, and Qusien (2026) shows legacy smog coverage straining under episodic framings. The present data suggest that even where an institutional newsroom invests in serious environmental video, its output may be outcompeted in reach by coverage that reframes a public-health emergency as a story of official success. If Pakistani publics increasingly encounter smog primarily through a solution-celebration frame, the civic pressure on which sustained regulatory enforcement depends may dissipate precisely during the seasons when hospital caseloads are multiplying. Pakistan's Provincial Environmental Protection Agencies should establish independent AQI dashboards, platform-epistemology training, and donor attention to promotional-capture risks in media-support programming (Qusien & Robbins, 2023).

### 7. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study examined how the Lahore smog crisis is epistemically constructed across two contrasting Pakistani YouTube channels, Dawn News English, representing institutional objectivity, and Discover Pakistan, representing affective authenticity, in order to understand what may happen to environmental journalism when it is dislocated onto platforms that neither the researcher nor the newsroom controls. A two-layer qualitative document analysis, combining metadata from 35 videos with full transcripts of eight purposively selected items, identified two asymmetric epistemic repertoires and a pattern of circulation asymmetry associated with them. The study's preliminary conceptual contribution is the sensitizing concept of *promotional capture*: a provisional proposition that creator-style affective authenticity may fuse with state publicity, producing a platform-native epistemic alternative that appears pre-aligned with governmental power. Offered as exploratory and grounded in one case,

one platform, and one country, it warrants systematic empirical testing before broader claims can be advanced.

The analytic corpus, which is transcribed, is purposely concise. Intensive work with purposely diverse information-rich cases was preferred to volume (Malterud et al., 2016), but because the single-analyst coding design was used, the intercoder reliability statistics cannot be obtained, which is also an issue that should be addressed in future studies with collaborative coding or consensual qualitative research methods (Hill et al., 2005). The design is single platform; there may be variations in the epistemic practice on short-form formats. View counts are crude proxies to audience acceptance, and are only used in a descriptive manner. The analysis of documents is unable to get to the production intentions and audience interpretation directly (Bowen, 2009).

The reception studies, longitudinal designs, interviews on the production side and comparative research across South Asian smog crises (Delhi, Dhaka, Kathmandu) should be given first priority in the future research to determine the extent to which the promotional-capture pattern is context-specific. It is a right not a luxury as Dawn itself coverage emphasizes, clean air. The demand on the civic basis of this right will be determined by the knowledge Pakistani publics develop about their air, which will be either a verification or a promotional celebration.

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