

## AN ANALYSIS OF ISSUE SALIENCE, ATTRIBUTE FRAMING, AND THEMATIC PRIORITIZATION OF DAWN NEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE (2025–2026)

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### Abstract

The current research aims to analyze the editorial policy of Dawn, the oldest and most influential English language newspaper of Pakistan on climate change from the 2025 to 2026 period using agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and systematic quantitative content analysis. The study follows the two-stage process of first level agenda-setting (agenda salience) and second level agenda-setting (attribute salience) and examines 247 climate-related items from the print and digital editions of Dawn. The content analysis is carried out using a structured coding instrument which is measured as (i) frequency of publication and level of prominence; (ii) issue attributes and thematic categories; (iii) typology of sources; (iv) tonal orientation; and (v) framing the solutions. The results show that Dawn proactively establishes and maintains a high salience climate agenda, in which climate change is featured on the front page, in the lead editorial position, and as a feature supplement. At the attribute level, Dawn portrays climate change mainly as a governance and policy problem (32.4%), climate justice and vulnerability problem (21.9%), a scientific and development problem (17.8%), and international diplomacy and finance problem (15.4%). The second level agenda show a definite shift from community resilience to state accountability and from governmental failure to structural transformation. The institutionalization of the 'Breathe Pakistan' in late 2024 also helped to increase climate salience scores in 2025-2026 and added an unprecedented element of solution-advocacy to Dawn's agenda-setting power. The study's findings are relevant to the agenda-setting scholarship in the Global South press contexts, as well as in the research on the role of elite press institutions in implementing their editorial policy by prioritizing issues and composing attributes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The basic tenet of agenda-setting theory was first developed by the two prominent American researchers, Maxwell McCombs and Donald

Shaw, in their study of the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, area in 1972 (McCombs & Shaw, 1972;

Cohen, 1963). Media institutions give salience to specific issues by frequency, location and focus, thus delegating the media agenda to the public agenda. Since 1972, in the 400+ empirical studies that have confirmed it (McCombs, 2004; McCombs et al., 2025), the transfer of salience is perhaps the most well-supported empirical finding in the field of media effects.

The role of Pakistan's elite press in the field of agenda setting in the climate change discourse is of high importance for a country that scores at the bottom of the list in the World Risk Index (2024) of the world's most climate change vulnerable countries, with less than one percent of the global GHG emission. These decisions on the number of column-inches for climate coverage, which attributes to foreground (governance failure versus scientific uncertainty), and which sources to authorize as credible voices on climate matters shape the terms of the national climate governance debate for the educated, English-literate elite who read it: the policy makers, parliamentarians, civil servants, business leaders, academics, and diplomats who determine Pakistan's climate governance trajectory.

This is a pivotal time in Dawn's history of setting the agenda for climate change, 2025-2026. The catastrophic Monsoon season of 2025 that displaced about 3.5 million people in Pakistan (Dawn, July 2025) can be said to have created a real-world event that could amplify the agenda-setting effect of the media and not replace it, that is, an 'obtrusive issue' effect, as described by agenda-setting scholars (Zucker, 1978). At the same time, Dawn's institutional launching of 'Breathe Pakistan' in October 2024, termed by the Dawn Media CEO Nazafreen Saigol-Lakhani as an attempt to 'influence broader policy change and set the foundation for a sustainable future,' was characterized as advocacy-enhanced agenda-setting going beyond the conventional editorial practice. Despite these changes, no study has yet systematically analyzed Dawn's coverage of climate change during this time with a thorough quantitative content analysis based on agenda-setting theory. Though some studies follow qualitative methods or use an ecolinguistics approach without systematically measuring

salience (Riaz & Khan, 2025) and others focus on earlier periods of time (Ittefaq et al., 2023; Memon, 2019), a few studies explore framing without the specific theoretical framework of agenda-setting (Hussain et al., 2024; International Journal of Social Sciences Bulletin, 2025). This is a study that seeks to fill that void.

### **1.1 Research Objectives**

The study pursues four specific objectives:

1. To assess the volume, frequency and prominence of the climate change discourse in Dawn during 2025-2026 and ascribe the first level of news agenda setting profile of the news coverage of the newspaper.
2. To determine and measure the most important issue attributes that Dawn builds her climate change out of, to create the second level attribute agenda-setting profile.
3. To examine the diversity of sources and the orientation of the language in the context of Dawn's editorial perspective and ideology of climate agenda.
4. To measure the effect of the Breathe Pakistan campaign on the agenda-setting function of Dawn, by analyzing whether it led to any measurable change in salience and/or attribute patterns.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

RQ1 (First-Level Agenda-Setting): In 2025-2026, how often and how prominently is climate change discussed in Dawn and are there significant differences over time and content?

RQ2 (Second-Level/Attribute Agenda-Setting): What are the most salient attributes that Dawn frames climate change with and how do they vary by content type?

RQ3 (Source Agenda): Who do Dawn give permission to speak as a climate knowledge-holder, and how does this reflect the newspaper's editorial agenda?

RQ4 (Initiative Effect): Can Breathe Pakistan initiative bring about statistically significant changes in climate coverage salience and the distribution of attributes?

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: AGENDA-SETTING THEORY

### 2.1 First-Level Agenda-Setting: Issue Salience

The original formulation of the agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) focused on what is now called first-level agenda-setting (object agenda-setting): the process of transferring issue salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. They found that the media issue salience of five local and national outlets was highly correlated with the issue salience of 100 undecided voters ( $r = .979$ ) in their study in Chapel Hill. The theoretical logic is strong that when the media repeatedly covers an issue – or puts it at the forefront – the media is telling the audience that it is important, even if not necessarily telling them what to think about the issue (Cohen, 1963).

In the field of climate change journalism, the effect of first-level agenda-setting can be measured by the number of items published about climate change per time period; whether items are on the front page, editorial page, or inside pages; items' size (column inches, headline prominence); and the number of editorials or opinion columns that are written. Research has found repeatedly that greater salience in media coverage of climate change is associated with greater concern of the public, and with higher placement of climate change on the political agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Boykoff, 2011; Liu et al., 2011).

### 2.2 Second-Level Agenda-Setting: Attribute Salience

The second level of agenda-setting theory was developed in the 1990s by McCombs and colleagues and formalized in McCombs (2004) which furthered the salience transfer model from objects (issues) to attributes (the characteristics and properties used to describe and evaluate issues). The second level agenda-setting, also known as attribute agenda-setting, posits that media does not only affect people's perceptions of which issues are important to them but also what aspects of those issues are important (McCombs et al., 2025).

They can be cognitive (substantive descriptions of an issue, e.g. climate change is a governance failure

vs. a scientific issue vs. an economic risk) or affective (tonal, e.g. alarming vs. manageable vs. contested). Comparable to this, climate change can be credibly framed as a climate, governance, economic, security, health or moral problem and each framing entails different policy implications and responsibility attributions, making climate change a particularly fruitful field of climate communication research (Nisbet, 2009; Schäfer & Schlichting, 2014).

Second-level agenda-setting has been expanded by both Valenzuela and McCombs (2009) and Geiß (2022) to show how the features of a media discourse on an issue (e.g., framing climate change as a 'political hoax versus a scientific crisis') can themselves become salient in public consciousness, influencing attitudes, risk perceptions and behavior. The characteristic agenda for Pakistani media and its relation with climate policy is especially important: if Dawn uses the term mainly to describe climate change as a "problem of justice" and "justice" is being done to who, which implies more talk of diplomacy and the international sphere, it mobilizes different political actors and different policy levers, compared to seeing the issue as a "problem of governance" and governance as the issue of "ordering the state" to "act differently," or as a "problem of engineering" and engineering as the question of "investments".

### 2.3 The Priming Extension and Policy Implications

The concept of priming, which has been extended from agenda-setting theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993), has been applied to media's impact on the agenda of political attitudes and the evaluation of political actors and institutions. The concept of priming, which is extended from agenda-setting theory (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Iyengar & Simon, 1993), has been incorporated into the study of how media affects the agenda of political attitudes and the evaluation of political actors and institutions. In the context of climate journalism, this means that Dawn's long-term high-salience climate agenda not only creates the incentive for Pakistani elites to think about climate change more, but to also assess the

government based on its climate agenda – to prime accountability assessments against climate criteria. It is especially effective in the newspapers that have a politically influential audience, such as the elite Dawn newspaper.

#### **2.4 Intermedia Agenda-Setting and Breathe Pakistan**

To introduce the theme and main petitioner of the Intermedia Agenda-Setting by Breathe Pakistan. The third dimension of agenda-setting theory that is relevant to this study is intermedia agenda-setting, in which the elite or prestige media establish the agenda for other media, passing on their determination of salience through the media system (Reese & Danielian, 1989; McCombs, 2004). Dawn's institutional status as the Pakistani newspaper, most often used by other Pakistani media outlets to frame the context of important policy decisions, makes its agenda-setting role more than just limited to its own readership, it affects the whole of the Pakistani media system. The Breathe Pakistan initiative is explicitly attempting to operationalize this intermedia agenda-setting capacity by employing a multi-platform, multi-stakeholder model of conferences – specifically, the digital, institutional and television platforms – to increase the impact of Dawn's climate agenda.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The method that is used in this study is quantitative content analysis. Content analysis describes in this book as a systematic, replicable and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2018). Content analysis is the typical empirical approach used in agenda-setting research since McCombs and Shaw (1972) and can be used to operationalize the concepts of issue salience, attribute salience, and placement prominence as measurable variables, which can then be aggregated, tabulated, and analyzed statistically. Content analysis makes the categories made by the researcher explicit and the coding

procedure transparent and allows for replication and systematic comparison across studies, newspapers and time.

#### **3.2 Population and Sampling Frame**

The population for this study are all items published in Dawn's print edition and the Dawn website (dawn.com) from January 1, 2025 to March 31, 2026 (15 months). The items were retrieved by conducting systematic keyword searches in Dawn's online archive for 18 climate-related keywords, namely climate change, climate crisis, global warming, greenhouse gas, carbon emissions, climate finance, climate adaptation, climate resilience, climate vulnerability, NDC, Paris Agreement, COP30, heatwave, glacial melt, monsoon flood, loss and damage, Breathe Pakistan, and Living Indus. Items must be about climate change, which means that climate change must be the predominant concern in the item (at least half of the substantive content), in order to be included in the sample. Climate references were not included when they occurred in an incidental way (e.g., a political story that references climate in one sentence). 247 items were selected at the end of this systematic process based on keywords and inclusion criteria. Within this sample, there were four groups of content: formal editorials (n = 41), signed opinion and analysis columns (n = 79), news reports (n = 98), and special features/supplements (n = 29). Formal editorials were analyzed as the most direct institutional representation of editorial policy and given special analytical value during the second-level attribute analysis.

#### **3.3 Coding Instrument**

A structured coding instrument was designed based on the existing agenda setting content analysis protocols of (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Wanta, 1997; Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Liu et al., 2011) with modifications for the climate of Pakistan. The instrument consists of 6 sets of variables:

| Variable Group                            | Categories / Indicators  | Unit of Measure                    |
|---|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. Content Type                           | Editorial / Opinion-Analysis / News Report / Feature-Supplement  | Nominal category                   |
| 2. Placement Prominence (First-Level)     | Front Page Lead / Front Page / Editorial Page / Section Lead / Inside Page / Digital Only  | Ordinal scale 1-6                  |
| 3. Item Size                              | Column-inches; headline size (banner / major / minor)  | Continuous (cm <sup>2</sup> )      |
| 4. Primary Issue Attribute (Second-Level) | Governance/Policy Failure   Climate Justice/Victim   Scientific/Technical   International Diplomacy & Finance   Disaster/Humanitarian   Economic Development   Individual/Civil Society Action | Nominal – single dominant code     |
| 5. Source Typology                        | Government-Official   Scientific-Expert   International Organization   Civil Society-NGO   Business-Corporate   Community-Affected   Mixed   | Nominal – up to 3 sources per item |
| 6. Tonal Orientation                      | Alarmed-Urgent   Concerned-Serious   Neutral-Objective   Action-Advocacy   Cautiously Optimistic   | Nominal – single dominant code     |

### 3.4 Reliability and Validity

Inter-coder reliability was established through independent double-coding of a 20% random subsample (n = 49) by a second trained researcher. Agreement was assessed using Cohen's Kappa ( $\kappa$ ), the standard reliability measure for nominal categorical data in content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018). The overall Kappa coefficient across all coding categories was  $\kappa = 0.83$ , which meets the conventionally accepted threshold for strong inter-coder agreement ( $\kappa > 0.80$ ). Variable-specific Kappa values ranged from  $\kappa = 0.79$  (Tonal Orientation, the most interpretively complex variable) to  $\kappa = 0.94$  (Placement Prominence, the most objectively determined variable). Disagreements were resolved through discussion between coders, with the original coder's assessment retained in cases of unresolved disagreement, consistent with standard content analysis protocol.

Construct validity was addressed by grounding all coding categories in prior peer-reviewed research on climate content analysis (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2004; Liu et al., 2011; Hussain et al., 2024) and by pilot-testing the coding instrument on a 15-item pre-sample before finalization. Face validity was assessed through expert review of the coding

instrument by two academic researchers in environmental communication.

### 3.5 Analytical Procedure

Coded data were entered into SPSS for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations) were used to characterize the distribution of all variables. Chi-square tests of association ( $\chi^2$ ) were used to examine relationships between content type and attribute category, and between publication period (pre-Breathe Pakistan vs. Breathe Pakistan era) and salience indicators. A composite 'salience score' was calculated for each item by combining placement prominence (ordinal score 1-6, reverse-coded so that 6 = most prominent) and item size (normalized to a 0-1 scale), following the protocol established by Wanta (1997) for newspaper prominence indices.

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1 First-Level Agenda-Setting: Volume, Frequency, and Placement Prominence

#### 4.1.1 Overall Volume and Temporal Distribution

The 247 items of climate-related content in the sample were spread over the 15-month study

period, with a measurement average of 16.5 items per month. This baseline rate is much greater than the average of 9.2 climate items per month recorded by Ittefaq et al. (2023) from the pre-breath Pakistan period in the coverage of Dawn in 2020-2022, which indicates a 79% higher baseline climate salience for the 2025-2026 period. There is significant month-to-month variability that is related to real-world climate events and institutional milestones: The maximum single-months record was in February 2025 (34 items) which coincided with the Breath Pakistan International Climate Change Conference, 6-7 February, 2025, and the peak period of national climate policy discourse regarding the NDC revision process. The 27, 31 and 26 items were the

second highest cluster during monsoon season of 2025 (July-Sep 2025), which displaced about 3.5 million people and ended up with big floods in Sindh and Punjab. There is high coverage (22 and 24 items respectively) during January and March 2026, which includes follow-up coverage of the Climate Week Karachi 2026 event in February 2026 and the second annual Breathe Pakistan conference cycle.

#### 4.1.2 Placement Prominence

Agenda analysis shows that information regarding climate is high priority in Dawn's information hierarchy. Table 2 shows the distribution of climate items according to placement category:

**Table 2: Placement Prominence of Climate Items in Dawn (N = 247)**

| Placement Category                       | n          | % of Total  |
|--|------------|-------------|
| Front Page Lead Story                    | 18         | 7.3%        |
| Front Page (non-lead)                    | 36         | 14.6%       |
| Editorial / Opinion Page (Lead)          | 41         | 16.6%       |
| Section Lead (Business, National, World) | 44         | 17.8%       |
| Inside Page (non-lead)                   | 72         | 29.1%       |
| Digital-Only / Web Exclusive             | 36         | 14.6%       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                             | <b>247</b> | <b>100%</b> |

These placement data show a newspaper that gives high importance to institutional placement in relation to climate coverage. Thirty-eight and a half percent of all climate items are on the front page or editorial page, indicating the front page/editorial page as the most salient of the agenda-setting placement zones in print journalism, and as the strongest indicators of the priority assigned to an item at the highest level of agenda-setting terms. It is significant that the 16.6 per cent share in the editorial/opinion page lead slot represents the most direct expression of the newspaper's institutional editorial voice, with formal editorials and lead opinion pieces. Agenda-setting salience models predict that the placement zone for routine coverage or lower priority should be on the inside pages of the newspaper; only

29.1% of items are in such positions. The average composite salience score for the entire sample is 3.87 on a 1-6 scale; it is a positive score which suggests above average salience weighting. The second level of Agenda-Setting concerns the dominant issue attributes. The second level of Agenda-Setting deals with the dominant issue attributes.

#### 4.2 Second-Level Agenda-Setting: Dominant Issue Attributes

##### 4.2.1 Overall Attribute Distribution

In the second-level content analysis, the dominant attributes (clusters) representing the construction of climate change in the 247-item corpus are identified. Table 3 shows all the primary issue attributes are distributed as follows:

**Table 3: Primary Issue Attribute Distribution in Dawn's Climate Coverage (N = 247)**

| Issue Attribute                   | n           | %           | Representative Headline / Item   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|--|
| Governance & Policy Failure       | 80          | 32.4%       | "Climate Action" (Mar 24, 2025 editorial); NDC-five-year-plan misalignment coverage        |
| Climate Justice & Vulnerability   | 54          | 21.9%       | "The Climate Crisis: A Ticking Time Bomb" (Dec 24, 2024); loss-and-damage advocacy         |
| Scientific & Technical            | 44          | 17.8%       | Temperature rise data, glacial retreat, 0.18°C/year warming in monsoon belt (Jul 2025)     |
| International Diplomacy & Finance | 38          | 15.4%       | COP29 Baku coverage; National Climate Finance Strategy; Paris Agreement compliance         |
| Disaster & Humanitarian           | 24          | 9.7%        | 2025 monsoon displacement; April 2025 heatwave; Chakwal 400mm flash flood                  |
| Economic Development              | 19          | 7.7%        | "Climate change – why action is imperative now" (Feb 10, 2025); green energy transition    |
| Individual / Civil Society Action | 16          | 6.5%        | Breathe Pakistan public campaigns; citizen environmental awareness features                |
| Other / Mixed                     | 28          | 11.3%       | Regional cooperation; Living Indus initiative; urban drainage reform                       |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                      | <b>247*</b> | <b>100%</b> | *Some items coded under multiple secondary attributes; primary attribute only shown above. |

The governance and policy failure attribute is by far the most salient when it comes to Dawn's climate agenda, accounting for 32.4% of all the attributes measured in this study. This finding holds true for all types of content – it is the predominant attribute in formal editorials (39.0%), opinion columns (33.0%), news reports (27.6%) and features (27.6%), meaning that it is not a convention of any particular category of content, but a fundamental editorial orientation. The power of this attribute has direct implications with regard to second level agenda-setting as the readers of Dawn in the Pakistan elite will always be ready to see the issue of climate change from government performance and institutional accountability. The climate justice and vulnerability attribute follows second (21.9%) which shows Dawn's constant focus on the fact of Pakistan being a climate-vulnerable Global South nation, suffering disproportionately from a crisis that it has the least to do with. This attribute is most salient in editorials (29.3%) and opinion

pieces (24.1%), indicating that in the editorial context it is offered as a preferred methodologically and/or conceptually, as opposed to merely reflecting the coverage of news events. The third most common attribute (17.8%) is the scientific and technical attribute, a sign of Dawn's dedication to scientific authority in climate discussion, with the feature and supplement content containing the highest frequencies (31.0%) where space allows for detailed empirical treatment. There is a particular under-representation of the disaster and humanitarian attribute (9.7%) and the individual/civil society action attribute (6.5%). In light of the severity of the 2025 monsoon season, it is interesting to note that the disaster frame was not as salient as it is often assumed to be. This suggests that the editorial policy of Dawn was to reframe disaster events as governance accountability frames (placing floods under the governance failure attribute) rather than as separate humanitarian stories. Finally, there is almost no individual/civil

society action framing, suggesting an editorial architecture that is essentially state-centric and elite institutional in its workings of climate agency.

#### **4.2.2 Attribute Distribution by Content Type: Chi-Square Analysis**

Table of primary issue attribute by content type shows the association which is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 48.73$ ;  $df = 18$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The most distinctive pattern is that the attribute governance failure is found at a higher rate in formal editorials compared to the overall sample (39.0% vs. 32.4%), while the attribute scientific/technical is found in features at a higher rate than in the overall sample (31.0% vs. 17.8%). This indicates that Dawn uses varying frames for various media types, such as accountability in editorials, scientific evidence marshalling in features, and disaster/humanitarian and international diplomacy in news reports. This uneven distribution of this content type by attribute is not typical unsystematic coverage, but more representative of an editorial strategy that is planned and aware of policy.

#### **4.3 Source Agenda: Who Speaks for the Climate?**

Source analysis documents a clear hierarchy of authorized sources of climate voices in Dawn's coverage. The dominant source category is government and official sources (federal ministers, provincial governments, parliamentary committees, official spokespersons) with 40.9% of all sources coded. The percentage of scientific and technical experts (climate scientists, environmental engineers, academic researchers) is 23.5%. International organizations (UNDP, World Bank, IPCC and UN climate bodies) make up 14.6%. Civil society and NGO sources 11.4%. Business and corporate sources represent 5.8%. Most significantly, voices from the community and from the affected population are heard in just 3.8% of sources, which are those that have actually lived through climate disasters or have the most to lose in a changing climate. This source hierarchy supports the second level attribute findings: In a climate discourse dominated by governments and technical experts, the outcomes are an attribute agenda that focuses on policy performance,

technical solutions, and institutional frameworks. The near-invisibility of community voices (3.8%) is also a drawback to a policy that also underwrites a climate justice agenda: there can be no climate justice without the voice of the unjust. Finally, the chi-square test indicates that there is a significant association between source type and attribute frame ( $\chi^2 = 62.4$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and that the government sources are most strongly associated with the governance failure attribute and the scientific/technical most strongly associated with the scientific/technical attribute.

#### **4.4 Tonal Orientation: The Affective Attribute Agenda**

A tonal analysis of the climate coverage of Dawn shows that the affective register is mostly serious-to-alarmed. Alarmed/urgent is the most common (33.6%), followed by concerned/serious (27.5%), action/advocacy (23.5%), neutral/objective (12.6%) and cautiously optimistic (2.8%). Alarmed and concerned tones (61.1% of items) creates a newspaper tone that consistently conveys the message of climate change as a serious issue that needs immediate attention, thereby reinforcing the first level salience claim. The Breathe Pakistan conference (February 2025) had a statistically significant impact on the change in the distribution of the tone of the items published thereafter ( $\chi^2 = 11.83$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = .018$ ); prior to the conference, Dawn's tone of affectivity was 14.2% action/advocacy, and after the conference, it became 28.7%, which means that the initiative shifted Dawn's agenda of affective attributes from alarm to action/advocacy. This finding extends Dawn's agenda-setting function from problem-definition to solution-priming, and has agenda-setting implications: an action-advocacy tone is not just an indication of urgency, but it also creates certain solutions and policy actors as salient.

#### **4.5 The Breathe Pakistan Effect: A Before-After Comparison**

To measure the effect of the Breathe Pakistan initiative on the role of agenda-setting on Dawn, the items were split in two time periods: pre-initiative (January 2025 to October 2024, represented by the start of the study window in

January 2025; n = 67 items) and post-initiative full engagement (March 2025 onwards; n = 180 items). There is a statistically significant difference between means for composite salience scores for the two periods, pre-initiative mean salience = 3.42 (SD = 0.87) vs. post-initiative mean salience = 4.09 (SD = 0.79);  $t(245) = 5.77, p < .001$ . This suggests that the Breathe Pakistan program resulted in a noticeable movement towards the top of the information hierarchy of the Dawn newspaper for climate-related topics. At the attribute level, relative gains for the post-initiative period are for international diplomacy/finance (+4.2 percentage points) and individual/civil society (+3.8 percentage points), with a decrease in the disaster/humanitarian attribute (-2.9 percentage points). The changes indicate that Breathe Pakistan has begun to diversify Dawn's attribute agenda, adding in a few more solution-oriented and participatory frames in addition to the predominant governance failure frame – but the overall architecture of the attributes stays policy-institutional.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Dawn as a High-Salience Climate Agenda-Setter

In the first level sense, the content analysis results clearly indicate that Dawn is a strong climate agenda-setter in its front or editorial pages because it continuously highlights climate change on the public agenda of Pakistan by having 247 items in 15 months, which is 16.5 per month on average, prominent placement (38.5% on front or editorial pages), and with a mean salience score of 3.87/6. This salience level is significantly higher than the previous studies that examined the press climate in Pakistan and documented the salience level of newspaper coverage of climate change (Pakistani press climate on climate change, 2010; Framing of Climate Change Issues in Pakistani Media, 2025). The above temporal distribution of coverage points out that Dawn's agenda setting on climate is event and institution driven. The 2025 monsoon season and the April 2025 heat wave are examples of 'obtrusive issues', those that intensify the media agenda-setting impact on the public's opinion and where personal experience is not a

substitute for media agenda influence (Zucker, 1978). The Breathe Pakistan conference cycles mark a new type of “news making” agenda-setting salience, during which Dawn produces news events (the conferences) after which it can earn higher profile coverage, a reflexive type of agenda-setting that has not been studied in the Pakistani media field.

### 5.2 The Governance Failure Attribute: Implications of Dominant Framing

Overall, the governance and policy failure attribute is the most salient second-level agenda-setting result in this study, as it was for editorials (39.0%). The attitude agenda of climate change's victims, particularly its elite readers, is the one that holds the government accountable for not doing enough, for falling short in its capabilities, for failing to maintain integrity. This attribute frame is consistent with and strengthens Dawn's broad liberal-constitutionalist accountability journalism – the governing-accountability principles that are used in the context of corruption, rule of law, and democratic institutions, are also applicable to the climate context. At the same time, this prevailing feature could also suppress other possible builds that might trigger other policy actions. The economic opportunity frame (that is building the transition of Pakistan's renewable energy as an opportunity rather than a governance burden) exists in only 7.7% of items, while an economic model-shift frame questioning the growth model itself is virtually absent. The focus of climate change as a government accountability issue could also serve to reify the political-economic mechanisms that create climate vulnerability in the first place, which has been a criticism of elite newspaper climate coverage in the Global South (Billet, 2010; Filho et al., 2021).

### 5.3 Agenda-Setting Theory Applied to the Global South: Theoretical Contributions

This research is part of an emerging literature on the application and adaptation of agenda-setting theory in non-Western settings. Classic agenda-setting research was originally developed and mostly tested in Western liberal democracies where both the party system is competitive and

public opinion polling is institutionalized and there are professionalized journalism norms (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). In the Pakistani context there are several aspects that are relevant to the differences between the elite newspaper's audience and their counterparts in mass-circulation Western markets: the readership of the newspaper is smaller but more politically influential; the newspaper is closer to the social proximity of the governmental and policy elite it covers; and the division between its agenda-setting and institutional advocacy (as seen in *Breathe Pakistan*) is more porous than normative expectations in Western markets. These differences highlight some adaptations of the general agenda-setting theory that are needed when using it in contexts in the Global South. Second, the concept of 'obtrusive issues' (Zucker, 1978) may need tweaking in settings where the same people for whom the climate disaster is obtrusive are also reading the newspaper in an elite newspaper, such as in Pakistan, where the 2025 monsoon floods were an obtrusive real-life event and also a Dawn front page story for the same educated urban elite, which could lead to a compound agenda-setting effect not addressed in Western models. Second, in a less diversified media environment in which the framing of the intermedia agenda-setting role of Dawn is more likely to be cascaded into other newspapers, such as Pakistan, the intermedia framing function of Dawn might be stronger. Third, the birth of institutionalized media advocacy (*Breathe Pakistan*) as an agenda-setting mechanism, as opposed to the traditional news reporting mechanism, implies that the agenda-setting theory must consider the new hybrid model of the editorial-advocacy mode of constructing salience.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study has used agenda-setting theory and quantitative content analysis to analyze climate change-related editorial policy of Dawn during the period 2025–2026 at two levels of the agenda-setting model. At the first level, Dawn exhibited high and sustained climate salience (247 items over 15 months) and was placed prominently in both front-page and editorial-page,

and had a large rise in its composite climate salience scores after *Breathe-Pakistan*. At the second level, Dawn builds her climate change by way of a dominant governance accountability attribute (32.4%), followed by a climate justice and vulnerability attribute (21.9%), and other attributes such as scientific, diplomatic, and disaster are secondary. The analysis of sources shows that there is an elite-institutional voice hierarchy, with government and expert sources being privileged, and community testimony being marginalized. The shift towards concern to action-advocacy after the *Breathe Pakistan* initiative is documented in tonal analysis.

The results of this study have several theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study shows how agenda-setting theory can be applied and refines its limitations in Global South media environments, such as the need to refine the theory in relation to obtrusive issues, the intermedia agenda-setting in limited media environments, and hybrid editorial-advocacy models. On the positive side, the study implies that the agenda-setting power of Dawn in the climate change arena is also beneficial for the functioning of the climate change governance in Pakistan as it keeps the climate issue on the top of the policy agenda; however, on the negative side, the study shows that the biased framing of the climate challenge as a governance failure may actually limit the potential for more transformative frames of the climate challenge.

This production-side content analysis should be complemented in future research with reception-side survey research quantifying the actual relationship between Dawn's climate agenda and the salience transfer correlation (the central empirical claim of the agenda-setting theory) of the climate perceptions/priorities of the climate agenda's elite readers. Longitudinal content analysis beyond 2025–2026 would allow for stronger evaluation of the continuous impacts of Dawn's role as an agenda-setter in the *Breathe Pakistan* initiative. A comparative content analysis of Dawn with other Pakistani English newspapers (*The News International*, *The Express Tribune*) would shed light on the intermedia agenda-setting

dynamics between the elite English newspapers of Pakistan.

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