



# EXPLORING THE INSIGHTS OF MEDIA ACADEMICS ON THE ROLE OF MEDIA AS PUBLIC SPHERE IN CLIMATE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN PAKISTAN

Sadaf Asif<sup>1</sup>, Aqeel Ahmed<sup>2</sup>, Muhammad Arshad<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Scholar, Department of Media & Communication Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of Media & Communication Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad

<sup>3</sup>PRO, Ministry of Climate Change and Environmental Coordination, Government of Pakistan

<sup>1</sup>saasif@numl.edu.pk, <sup>2</sup>aahmed@numl.edu.pk, <sup>3</sup>mediacares@gmail.com

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## Abstract

### Keywords

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Corresponding Author: \*

Sadaf Asif

This study explored the expert insights of media academics on the role of media as a public sphere in climate policy implementation in Pakistan. The study also dealt with how the media influences public opinion as well as the climate change experts and the policy makers that may lead towards policy development and implementation. Guided by the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological approach, the study employed qualitative research design and subsequently the in-depth interviews as a research method to document responses of the purposively-selected sample of media academics serving in Islamabad and Rawalpindi-based universities/HEIs. It explored four themes including Media as a Facilitator of the Public Sphere in Climate Discourse, Limitations of the Public Sphere in Climate Policy Engagement, Role of Media Education in Strengthening Public Sphere Engagement, and Public Sphere and Its Impact on Climate Policy Implementation. It underscored the need for a multifaceted strategy encompassing media reforms, education, and public participation to fully utilize the media as a catalyst for climate policy understanding and action in Pakistan.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is adversely affected of climate change, marked by extreme weather patterns, glacier melting, and looming danger of water scarcity (Ayaz & Ahmed, 2024). Climate Risk Index 2025 ranks Pakistan at the top of the worst-affected countries due to climatic calamities (Germanwatch, 2025). These environmental changes exacerbate the socioeconomic vulnerabilities by endangering public health, agriculture, and water resources (Ahmed & Luqman, 2024) mainly due to country's geographic location and inadequate capacity for adaptation. Mitigating future hazards requires effective adaptation and mitigation measures, such as

climate-resilient infrastructure and sustainable water management (UN-Habitat, 2023). In order to improve resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan needs to address climate change through concerted efforts through local and global collaborations. Effective climate change communication including active media engagements is helpful in raising awareness and encouraging action thorough informed citizenry (Tahir & Ahmed, 2024). By interpreting scientific facts and influencing the perceived urgency of the issue, it shapes public opinion and frequently influences individual behavior and policy debate (Boykoff & Boykoff, 2007).

Media academics and researchers are helpful in investigating the role of media in climate change communication and may offer recommendations to enhance public participation (Ahmed et al., 2024). Public perception and opinion are greatly influenced by the media, particularly when it comes to complicated and pressing problems like climate change. Media coverage of climate change in Pakistan can shape public perceptions, professional judgments, and, eventually, the political will to address climate-related concerns.

#### **Studies on Pakistani Media and Climate Change.**

Due to extreme weather occurrences including destructive floods, heatwaves, and droughts, Pakistan has become the most vulnerable nation to climate change. Media has a greater role to play in public opinion formation and policy response development. Since the media has an important role in determining public discourse on climate change as it acts as a bridge among scientific verdicts, policy discussions, and public perception. Studies point out the influence of media coverage on public perception, and political agendas, and the subsequent impact on global negotiations on climate change. Many studies in the domain of climate change communication have documented media coverage patterns and framing aspects (Ahmed et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2025; Hussain, 2024; Javed et al., 2024). Some other researches have estimated the influence of media on public perception, action, and response (Bhatti et al., 2024; Khan & Ahmed, 2024; Younis & Ahmed, 2024) whereas some others have explored various aspects of journalism field (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ayaz & Ahmed, 2024; Tahir & Ahmed, 2024).

#### **Media, Public Sphere and Pakistan's Climate Discourse**

Pakistan's media landscape is characterized by diverse aspects. Public and private sector outlets, although, have different agenda, none of the outlets have prioritized climate change and its mitigation strategies in their news reports and discussions. Furthermore, the content generated by these organizations differs significantly in terms of the quality and depth of the information provided. Although the printed media provides more detailed coverage of the problems associated with the climate, television channels often represent a fragmented idea of the problem (Ferdous & Khatun, 2020). Television programs, as a rule, focus on short-term events, such as heat waves, floods or monsoon rains, not

broader and long-term discussions on the main causes of change climate and potential solutions (Bibi, 2024). On the contrary, digital media platforms, including social networks, have been an important space for climate change discourse (Gokcimen & Das, 2024). In Pakistan, social networks such as X, formerly known as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have allowed climate activists, environmental NGOs and experts to have in-person public conversations and climate activism (Younis & Ahmed, 2024). Social media's role in amplifying climate change awareness is increasingly significant, especially among younger generations (Khan & Ahmed, 2024). However, these platforms also present challenges related to misinformation, where unverified and exaggerated claims about climate impacts can spread rapidly. Besides all this, there is a growing concern among Pakistani citizens about adverse effects of climate change. Although public perception varies with respect to demographic characteristics, of the individuals, including education, socio-economic status and geographic location.

#### **Problem Statement:**

Extensive literature is available that documents media framing of climate change, (social) media's role in public perception formation, media influence on climate policy circles, working routines, and challenges to climate journalists. However, limited research has been carried out that could document the point of view of media academics about the role of media as public sphere in climate policy development and execution in Pakistan. Hence, this study has explored the insights of media educationists working in the universities/HEIs on the role of public sphere in climate policy implementation in Pakistan.

#### **Research Objective:**

This study has investigated the expert opinion of the media academics about the ways in which media-driven public debate in Pakistan in the shape of public sphere may affect the formulation and application of climate policies. It has focused to gain a thorough understanding of how the public realm either helps or hinders climate action by looking at how climate change is portrayed in the media. The study was devised with an objective to explore the insights of media educationists on the role media as a public sphere in climate policy implementation in Pakistan.

## Research Question

The study was guided by the following research question: RQ: How do Pakistani media academics perceive the role of media as a public sphere in climate policy implementation in Pakistan?

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## Methodology:

The researchers, guided by the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological approach, adopted qualitative research design and used in-depth interviews as a research method to explore the expert insights of media academics on the role of media as a public sphere in the implementation of climate policies in Pakistan. As the research sought to interpret contextual understanding and subjective meanings, the in-depth interviews were considered the most appropriate method to get detailed and rich data with ease of flexibility (Boyce, 2006; Dawadi et al., 2021) that could reveal the intricacies of media discourse on environmental governance.

## Study Population:

The population for this research comprised academicians (university faculty), specialized in mass communication journalism, media studies, having expertise or interest in climate change communication, and were based in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

## Sampling Technique and the Sample:

The study adopted purposive sampling technique, further narrowing it down to criterion sampling. The sample of the study was selected based on the criteria of having their background in mass communication, journalism, and media and communication studies, teaching and/or conducting research in any of the Islamabad or Rawalpindi-based universities/HEIs, and had have carried out research work in the domain of climate change communication.

## Data Collection:

The researchers conducted an online survey of websites of the National University of Science & Technology, Islamabad, International Islamic University, Islamabad, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science & Technology, Islamabad, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Bahria University, Islamabad, COMSATS University Islamabad, Federal Urdu University,

Islamabad, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, and Foundation University, Islamabad, as well as online profiles of teachers and researchers associated with these universities to know about their research interests. After identifying the media academicians in the respective universities with interests in climate change communication were approached via email, and phone calls for their consent to be part of this study. A total of 16 researchers out of the 19 shortlisted potential respondents agreed to participate in this research. The researchers reached data saturation after conducting 11 interviews.

## Interview Guide:

The interview guide was based on semi-structured, open-ended questions, inquiring about respondents' perception and opinion about the role of media as public sphere in building public discourse on climate change, limitations of the contemporary media in fostering debate on climate policy and mitigation, potential contributions of media educationists in public engagement for call to action and advocacy efforts, and development of public discourse leading to policy action in Pakistan on climate issues. Furthermore, the semi-structured questionnaire was also vetted by three senior faculty members of media and communication, with expertise of research in climate change communication.

## Interview logistics:

The researchers conducted face-to face interviews as per convenience and availability of the respondents, applying hybrid linguistic mode that involved simultaneous use of English and Urdu languages. The interview duration ranged between 45 minutes to 1 hour and 28 minutes. Although the respondents did not agree for video recording, the audio records and handwritten notes were enough to accurately transcribe the responses.

## Ethical Considerations:

The researchers adhered to the ethical research standards and practices by request dissemination for informed consent, to consideration of voluntary participation, and strict adherence to anonymity and data confidentiality, particularly the personal identity, including names, designations and personal contact details.

**Data Analysis:**

The researchers used thematic analysis as a technique to document the expert insights gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The thematic analysis is an analysis technique, adopted by the researchers carrying out qualitative studies (Dawadi, 2020). The current study applied a six-step systematic model (Braun

& Clarke, 2006) that included data familiarization, code assigning, theme designing, theme revision, themes finalization, and example citing. Ahmed et al. (2024), Ayoub and Ahmed (2024) and Ayaz and Ahmed (2024) also applied the thematic scheme proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) while conducting research related to climate change communication.

**Table 1. Themes of the Study**

Main Themes	Sub Themes
Media as a Facilitator of the Public Sphere in Climate Discourse	Climate Journalism and Policy Awareness Media Framing of Climate Change Social Media as an Alternative Public Sphere
Limitations of the Public Sphere in Climate Policy Engagement	Political and Corporate Influence on Media Lack of Investigative Climate Journalism Accessibility Issues for Public Participation
Role of Media Education in Strengthening Public Sphere Engagement	Teaching Climate Communication in Media Studies Training Journalists for Policy-Oriented Reporting Media Literacy and Public Awareness
Public Sphere and Its Impact on Climate Policy Implementation	Public Opinion and Policy Pressure Civil Society and Media Alliances Challenges in Policy Implementation Due to Weak Public Discourse

Table 1 reflects themes and the subsequent sub-themes as discovered by the researchers after the in-depth interviews, of the Islamabad and Rawalpindi based media educationists on the role of public sphere in the implementation of climate policies in Pakistan, were transcribed. These themes and sub-themes have been explained as under:

**Theme 1: Media as a Facilitator of the Public Sphere in Climate Discourse**

One of the dominant perspectives among media educationists is that the media serves as a primary agent in shaping the public sphere for climate discourse. It provides information, creates awareness, and influences public engagement with climate policy.

**Sub-theme 1.1: Climate Journalism and Policy Awareness:** Media educationists highlight that journalistic reporting on climate change plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and informing people about policy decisions. Investigative journalism can hold policymakers accountable for inaction or

mismanagement in implementing climate policies. Examples include reports on Pakistan’s vulnerability to climate disasters (e.g., floods, heatwaves), which help shape discussions in public and policy domains. One media educationist shared, "Climate journalism in Pakistan is often superficial, focusing on the immediate aftermath of a disaster, like flooding or droughts. However, there have been cases where investigative journalists have reported on the lack of preparedness by the government. For instance, when the 2010 floods devastated the country, several investigative reports highlighted the inefficiencies in disaster management policies, pushing the government to take action." This example shows how investigative journalism raises awareness of policy shortcomings, influencing both public opinion and governmental action. The media’s role in reporting climate-related disasters helps to push policymakers to adopt more proactive measures.

**Sub-theme 1.2: Media Framing of Climate Change:** The way media frames climate change influences how the public perceives the issue. Some media outlets

sensationalize climate disasters, focusing on catastrophes rather than discussing long-term policy solutions. Conversely, some coverage presents climate change as an opportunity, emphasizing renewable energy investments and green economy policies. Media educationists stress that news framing impacts public engagement—if climate change is framed as an urgent crisis, public pressure on policymakers increases. A participant noted, "The media tends to frame climate change either as a catastrophic event or a far-off issue, but rarely in the context of local solutions. For example, when covering heatwaves in Karachi, the media often focuses on the immediate death toll rather than framing the issue in terms of government policy failures in cooling urban spaces or promoting green technologies." The framing of climate issues influences how the public and policymakers perceive urgency and responsibility. Media can frame climate change as either a global crisis or a local issue, impacting how solutions are proposed.

**Sub-theme 1.3: Social Media as an Alternative Public Sphere:** Digital platforms (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) have emerged as new public spheres where climate discussions occur. Climate activists, academics, and journalists engage in discussions outside of traditional media restrictions. Hashtags such as #ClimateActionPakistan and viral posts about climate injustices (e.g., deforestation, air pollution in Lahore) help mobilize public opinion. However, media educationists also point out risks of misinformation, where non-experts and conspiracy theories spread misleading climate narratives. One educator mentioned, "During the 2019 heatwave in Pakistan, hashtags like #SaveKarachi and #ClimateActionPakistan gained significant traction on Twitter. Youth-led campaigns such as these create an alternative public sphere where people not only discuss issues but also demand action from policymakers, bypassing the gatekeeping of traditional media." This example highlights how social media provides a space for public activism and policy discussion, which is often outside the influence of mainstream media. These platforms are crucial for mobilizing communities around climate issues.

## **Theme 2: Limitations of the Public Sphere in Climate Policy Engagement**

While media plays a role in facilitating the public sphere, media educationists also highlight several limitations that hinder meaningful climate discourse and policy engagement.

### **Sub-theme 2.1: Political and Corporate Influence on Media:**

Media in Pakistan operates under corporate ownership and political influence, which shapes how climate issues are reported. Certain media houses avoid critical discussions on environmental policies due to their links with industries (e.g., fossil fuel companies, real estate developers). Political parties use state-controlled media to push selective climate narratives, often downplaying policy failures. A media educationist noted, "The corporate ownership of media houses in Pakistan leads to selective coverage. For instance, the oil and gas sector is a significant advertiser for many major outlets, and this creates a situation where climate change reporting that is critical of fossil fuels is underrepresented." The corporate and political biases in media impact the representation of climate change, as powerful industries and political entities can suppress critical discourse.

### **Sub-theme 2.2: Lack of Investigative Climate Journalism:**

Many Pakistani journalists lack specialized training in climate reporting, leading to superficial coverage. Most media coverage reacts to climate disasters rather than proactively investigating policy implementation issues. A lack of financial resources for environmental journalism limits in-depth investigations into deforestation, water scarcity, or industrial pollution. One participant remarked, "Journalists rarely investigate governmental climate policies. For example, in the case of Pakistan's National Climate Change Policy (2012), while there was media coverage, there was little follow-up or investigation into whether the policies were being implemented effectively. This gap indicates a lack of in-depth journalism training on climate issues." This example demonstrates the lack of investigative journalism in climate reporting, highlighting the need for specialized training to enable journalists to hold governments accountable for climate policy execution.

**Sub-theme 2.3: Accessibility Issues for Public Participation:** Climate policy discussions in media are often dominated by urban elites, leaving out marginalized rural communities who face the worst climate impacts. Language barriers prevent Urdu and regional-language audiences from fully engaging in climate policy debates. Limited internet access in rural areas excludes certain populations from digital public sphere discussions. A media educator explained, "In rural Pakistan, climate policy discussions are often held in English or urban-based media platforms, excluding those who speak regional languages like Sindhi or Pashto. Furthermore, people in these areas lack internet access, limiting their participation in online discussions about climate policies." This example showcases the accessibility gap for certain populations in the public sphere, particularly in the context of climate communication. The language barrier and digital divide restrict access to vital information, impeding public engagement.

### **Theme 3: Role of Media Education in Strengthening Public Sphere Engagement**

Media educationists emphasize that universities and journalism programs play a critical role in shaping future media professionals who will engage with climate policy discussions.

**Sub-theme 3.1: Teaching Climate Communication in Media Studies:** Media curricula in Pakistan do not sufficiently focus on climate journalism, leading to a knowledge gap among journalists. Media educationists advocate for integrating climate communication courses that teach students how to report on policy issues, scientific data, and environmental justice. They emphasize the need for collaborations with environmental scientists to create interdisciplinary learning. A participant noted, "In our journalism program, we only recently introduced a module on climate change communication, which is still not a core part of the curriculum. When I first started teaching, climate change was barely mentioned in the textbooks. Our future journalists are largely unprepared to report on environmental issues comprehensively." This example highlights the gap in climate communication education. The slow integration of climate-related content into curricula suggests that many journalism students

graduate without the necessary skills to report on climate policy.

**Sub-theme 3.2: Training Journalists for Policy-Oriented Reporting:** There is a need for workshops and training programs for journalists on investigative techniques related to climate policy. Data journalism can help reporters analyze government reports, international climate agreements, and policy outcomes. Partnerships between universities and media organizations can provide real-world reporting opportunities for students. One media educator shared, "We have started a collaboration with an environmental NGO to provide workshops on climate policy analysis. Journalists are learning how to dissect policy documents and analyze how they align with the climate action goals set by international bodies like the UNFCCC. This training helps journalists not just report on climate issues but also investigate whether policies are being implemented effectively." This example illustrates a proactive approach to media education, where journalists are trained to critically engage with climate policies and their effectiveness, thus enhancing the public's understanding of policy implications.

**Sub-theme 3.3: Media Literacy and Public Awareness:** Public understanding of climate misinformation is weak, making media literacy programs essential. Universities can engage with local communities to teach how to critically consume climate-related news. Media educationists propose the use of interactive platforms (podcasts, documentaries, digital storytelling) to make climate policy discussions more engaging for the general public. A media educationist explained, "In collaboration with local NGOs, we have initiated a media literacy campaign focused on misinformation about climate change. Through community workshops, we are teaching people how to discern fake news and understand scientific data on climate change, thus enabling better public participation in climate policy discussions." This example reflects the role of media literacy in empowering the public to critically evaluate climate discourse. Media education initiatives like these help the public navigate misinformation and become more engaged in discussions about climate policy.

#### **Theme 4: Public Sphere and Its Impact on Climate Policy Implementation**

The effectiveness of the public sphere in influencing climate policy implementation is contingent on how well media connects public discourse with policymakers.

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##### **Sub-theme 4.1: Public Opinion and Policy Pressure:**

Public debates in media often lead to government action on climate issues. For example, widespread media coverage and public outcry over Karachi's urban flooding pressured local authorities to take policy measures. Media educationists argue that a more informed and vocal public sphere can strengthen policy accountability mechanisms. One media educator shared, "After media coverage of the Karachi water crisis, public protests and a growing media backlash forced the government to invest in water management policies. This is a perfect example of how media-driven public discourse can generate pressure on policymakers, making them more responsive to climate issues." This example illustrates how public opinion, fueled by media coverage, can demand accountability from policymakers and lead to tangible policy action.

##### **Sub-theme 4.2: Civil Society and Media Alliances:**

NGOs and advocacy groups collaborate with media to push climate issues into public debates. Investigative reports by environmental NGOs often gain traction in media, creating pressure on policymakers. However, some media educationists highlight that these alliances can be politically influenced, leading to selective reporting on climate issues. A participant mentioned, "NGOs like WWF Pakistan work closely with media outlets to ensure consistent coverage of climate policies. In 2020, media campaigns around Pakistan's forestry policies were amplified by joint efforts between journalists and environmental activists, ensuring greater visibility for policy issues." This example shows how NGOs and media work in tandem to raise awareness about climate policies, demonstrating how civil society-media alliances can contribute to policy implementation.

##### **Sub-theme 4.3: Challenges in Policy Implementation Due to Weak Public Discourse:**

Even when climate policies are introduced, weak media coverage and low public engagement mean they are not effectively implemented. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, political

instability, and lack of sustained media follow-up cause climate policies to remain on paper rather than in practice. Media educationists suggest that regular investigative reporting on policy progress can help sustain public pressure on governments. One media educationist stated, "Despite the introduction of several green policies in Pakistan, the public's lack of engagement has led to poor implementation. For instance, the renewable energy policy remains largely on paper, as there is insufficient media coverage that maintains public interest and accountability over time." This example highlights how weak or sporadic public discourse—caused by limited media follow-up or engagement—can lead to weak policy implementation, even when climate policies exist.

#### **Findings of the Study**

Based on the above thematic analysis, the study has found that:

1. Media is an instrumental platform to raise awareness about climate change and its adverse effects for Pakistani society. Investigative journalism may help persuade policymakers to put sincere and coordinated efforts as was the case during 2010 and 2022 floods in the country. Media portrayals and debates demonstrated media's power to cultivate both government response and public perception.
2. Media framing of climate change is reflected as catastrophically distant issue that affects public engagement. Furthermore, media coverage of climate issues is often inaccessible to marginalized communities and rural areas due to network limitations, and language and cultural barriers. It leads such groups of the Pakistani society to exclusion from the critical climate policy debates and interventions.
3. Curricula of the journalism and mass communication departments in Pakistani universities lacks robust climate communication courses and training programs, hindering the future journalists from scientific knowledge and training to cover climate change and its effects on the society, climate policy and its implementation, and climate mitigation. The collaborations between universities, government bodies and NGO may offer practical trainings in climate policy analysis and also prepare future climate journalists.
4. While media may influence both public and policy circles leading to short-term policy responses, feeble and fragile stakeholder engagement and inadequate follow-up

media coverage hamper sustainable action and climate policy implementation.

### Discussion

This study has added to the existing body of literature by exploring the insights of media academics about the role of media as public sphere in climate policy implementation in Pakistan. Policy discussions and public perceptions are greatly influenced by media framing. Although sensationalist or remote framing might raise awareness, it frequently falls short of providing audiences with practical solutions, which reduces engagement and the urgency of policy. Although it is growing, positive framing of green technologies and renewable energy is still minimal. This implies that in order to more successfully organize the public and political will, the media must strike a balance between crisis reporting and narratives of optimism and regional policy debates. Despite being acknowledged as a potent instrument for policy accountability, climate journalism is still underdeveloped because of institutional, financial, and capability limitations in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ayaz & Ahmed, 2024; Ittefaq et al., 2023). This study has acknowledged the role of media as instrumental platform to raise awareness about climate change and its adverse effects for Pakistani society. Furthermore, it has also documented the responses that recommended to carry out investigative journalism that may help policymakers and public alike for more coordinated efforts in terms of climate mitigation and policy implementation. These findings fall in conformity of the existing body of literature (Hassan et al., 2025; Lough, 2018; Manzoor & Ali, 2021; Trionfi & Salzenstein, 2024). However, media's capacity to retain public attention or pressure on policymakers to provide long-term climate solutions is diminished by the episodic and event-driven character of climate reporting. This disparity emphasizes the need for specific education and trainings in collaboration with government organizations and NGOs to establish climate journalism as a separate and demanding discipline within Pakistani media (Ahmed et al., 2024; Ayaz & Ahmed, 2024). The landscape of climate communication is further complicated by corporate and political influences on mainstream media. Selective and episodic reporting minimizes systemic and sustained coverage of climate issues. Sustainable reporting practices through follow-up stories can help

enhanced role of media as public sphere for Pakistani society (Hassan et al., 2025).

### Conclusion

This qualitative research based on in-depth interviews highlights the crucial yet complex role of media in shaping public discourse and persuading climate policy in Pakistan. Media acts as both a watch dog and a facilitator of public engagement, prompting government accountability. However, certain structural limitations including policy, corporate and political influences, shallow reporting practices, and limited access for underprivileged communities dent the potential of media to support sustained and inclusive climate discourse. Furthermore, the research also discloses a substantial gap in media education in Pakistan, where the potential future journalists often lack necessary trainings on climate journalism. The collaborations between academic institutions, media organizations, government institutions, and NGOs, may offer a way forward through specialized climate journalism trainings and media literacy workshops to empower journalists and aware public. Finally, while the media may persuade people and highlight public pressure, it can also guide policy action. For climate policy frameworks to take practical shape, there is a dire need for inclusive, sustained, and critically informed public sphere.

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