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BEYOND THE HEADLINES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY INTO PUBLIC PRIORITIES AND MEDIA FRAMING OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN KHYBER PAKHTUNKHWA

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the convergence and divergence between media portrayals of environmental issues and the lived priorities of the public in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. As a region acutely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, understanding the public's reception of environmental information is critical for effective policy and community action. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 residents from diverse demographic backgrounds, this research investigates how citizens perceive media framing of environmental news and how their own embodied, local experiences shape their environmental concerns. Thematic analysis of the interview data reveals four key themes: (1) A Perceptual Chasm: A profound disconnect exists between the media's focus on episodic, catastrophic events and the public's concern for chronic, localized problems such as waste management and water contamination. (2) A Crisis of Credibility: Participants widely perceive environmental reporting as sensationalized for ratings and instrumentalized for political purposes, leading to significant distrust in media narratives. (3) The Primacy of Lived Experience: Personal, sensory, and generational knowledge of the local environment consistently overrides media influence in shaping individual and community priorities. (4) A Demand for Empowering Narratives: There is a strong and articulate public desire for a shift away from problem-centric reporting towards solution-oriented, constructive journalism that provides actionable knowledge. The findings suggest that while the media plays a role in raising general awareness, its current agenda-setting and framing practices fail to resonate with the public's primary environmental concerns, potentially hindering meaningful



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engagement. The study concludes with detailed recommendations for media practitioners, policymakers, and civil society to collaboratively foster a more relevant, credible, and effective environmental discourse in the region. This research contributes a vital, audience-centered perspective to the field of environmental communication from a critical, under-researched global South context.

Keyword: Headline, Media Framing, Environmental Issue

Introduction

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province of immense geographical and cultural significance in Pakistan, is a land of dramatic contrasts. It is home to the majestic peaks of the Hindu Kush and Karakoram ranges, the fertile plains of the Peshawar Valley, and the winding course of the Kabul River. This ecological diversity, however, is matched by its profound vulnerability. For decades, the region has been on the frontline of geopolitical conflict, but today it stands on the frontline of a more insidious and perhaps more enduring battle: the fight against environmental degradation and climate change. The province is now a recognized climate change hotspot, facing a complex web of interconnected challenges, including accelerated glacial melt, erratic monsoon patterns resulting in devastating flash floods, widespread deforestation, and increasing urban air and water pollution (Khan & Khan, 2020).

These environmental pressures are not abstract threats; they are woven into the fabric of daily life and are amplified by the region's socio-economic realities. A rapidly growing population, increasing urbanization, and a heavy reliance on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture and tourism mean that environmental stability is directly linked to economic survival and social well-being. A delayed monsoon can bankrupt a farming community; a flash flood can wipe out a generation of infrastructure investment; contaminated water can trigger a public health crisis. In this high-stakes environment, public understanding, perception, and prioritization of these issues are paramount for fostering resilience and driving sustainable change.

The primary conduit for information and the main arena for public discourse is, overwhelmingly, the mass media. Pakistan's media landscape has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past two decades, exploding from a monolithic state-controlled entity into a vibrant, cacophonous, and highly competitive industry of private television channels, radio stations, newspapers, and digital platforms (Zia, 2019). This media, however, operates within a specific cultural and political context, one where the 24-hour news cycle is often dominated by political intrigue, security matters, and economic crises. Within this saturated information environment, environmental stories must compete for airtime and attention, and the way they are selected, framed, and presented has profound implications.

This leads to a critical inquiry into the "knowledge-action gap." Even when scientific information about environmental threats is available, why does it so often fail to translate into sustained public concern and collective action? One part of the answer may lie in the nature of the communication itself. The media, through its agenda-setting function, tells us what to think about, and through its framing function, it tells us how to think about it (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). If the media's agenda does not align with the public's lived realities, or if its frames present issues as distant, overwhelming, or politically motivated, the result can be cynicism, apathy, and disengagement rather than empowerment (Nisbet, 2009).



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This study, therefore, seeks to go "beyond the headlines" to conduct a deep, qualitative exploration of the public's relationship with environmental issues and media coverage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It moves away from analyzing media content alone and instead centers the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the citizens who are the intended audience. The research is guided by a primary research question and several sub-questions:

Main Research Question: How do the public's environmental priorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa compare with their perceptions of the media's framing of environmental issues?

Sub-Research Questions:

What are the primary, self-identified environmental concerns of residents in KP?

How do residents perceive the credibility, relevance, and utility of media coverage on these issues?

What role does personal and community experience play in shaping environmental attitudes, in contrast to media influence?

What kind of environmental information do residents of KP desire from the media to feel better informed and empowered?

By answering these questions, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the environmental communication landscape in a critically important region. It offers insights that are vital not only for the academic community but also for journalists, editors, policymakers, and activists working to build a more sustainable future for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

This research is situated at the intersection of environmental communication, media studies, and sociology, drawing primarily on the foundational theories of Agenda-Setting and Framing to understand the complex relationship between media messages and public perception.

Agenda-Setting Theory: Constructing Salience

The core proposition of Agenda-Setting Theory, as first articulated by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) in their seminal Chapel Hill study, is that a strong correlation exists between the issues the news media emphasize and the issues the public comes to regard as important. The theory suggests a transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. This process operates on two distinct levels. The **first level** is the traditional concept of issue salience: the media tells us what to think about. For instance, repeated and prominent coverage of deforestation can elevate its importance in the public consciousness over other, less-covered issues.

The second level of agenda-setting, often referred to as attribute agenda-setting, proposes that the media also influences which attributes of an issue are seen as most important, effectively telling us how to think about it (Ghanem, 1997). By focusing on the economic attributes of a new dam project (e.g., jobs, electricity) versus its environmental attributes (e.g., displacement, ecosystem damage), the media can "prime" the public to evaluate the project based on a specific set of criteria. This priming effect means that media attention to certain issues can alter the very standards by which people evaluate government performance and policy decisions. In the context of environmental politics, if the media consistently links flooding to poor governance, the public may be primed to



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judge officials based on their flood response, regardless of their performance in other areas.

While powerful, the agenda-setting effect is not uniform. Researchers have identified several contingent conditions that can moderate media influence. One of the most significant is an individual's level of personal experience with an issue. Issues that are obtrusive, or directly experienced by individuals (like the rising cost of food), are less susceptible to media agenda-setting than unobtrusive issues (like foreign policy or complex climate science) where the public relies almost exclusively on the media for information (Zucker, 1978). This study will explore this very dynamic: are environmental issues in KP obtrusive or unobtrusive, and how does this affect the media's ability to set the public agenda?

Framing Theory: Shaping Meaning

While agenda-setting deals with which issues receive attention, Framing Theory delves deeper into the specific ways those issues are presented and interpreted. As Robert Entman (1993, p. 52) famously defined it, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." A frame is not just about what is said, but also about what is left unsaid.

In environmental communication, frames are powerful tools that shape public understanding and engagement. Common frames identified in the literature include:

Episodic vs. Thematic Frames: Episodic frames present issues as standalone events (e.g., a specific flood in one village), often focusing on individual stories. Thematic frames place issues in a broader context (e.g., linking the flood to patterns of climate change, deforestation, and inadequate infrastructure) (Iyengar, 1991). Research shows that heavy exposure to episodic frames can lead audiences to attribute responsibility to individuals rather than to societal or political forces.

Conflict Frame: This presents an issue as a battle between two opposing sides (e.g., environmentalists vs. developers), often oversimplifying complex issues and emphasizing disagreement over potential consensus.

Economic Consequences Frame: This highlights the financial costs and benefits of environmental policies, often overshadowing ethical or ecological considerations.

Human Interest Frame: This uses emotional appeals and personal stories to make an issue more relatable, which can be effective but may also de-emphasize systemic causes. The process of framing involves both frame building (how journalists and other actors construct frames, influenced by their own biases, professional norms, and external pressures) and frame setting (the effect of these frames on public opinion and attitudes) (Scheufele, 1999). This study is primarily concerned with the reception end of frame setting, investigating how the frames perceived by the public in KP align with their own understanding of environmental problems.

Environmental Communication in a Global South Context

Much of the foundational literature on media and the environment originates from the Global North. However, the dynamics of environmental communication can be vastly different in the Global South. Research in contexts like Pakistan, India, and across Africa



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has highlighted several recurring themes. Media coverage is often characterized by being event-driven, reactive, and focused on catastrophes rather than on prevention or systemic issues (Hansen, 2011). Environmental issues are frequently politicized and subsumed within larger political or ethnic conflicts, rather than being treated as standalone societal challenges (Zia, 2019).

Furthermore, there is often a significant urban-rural divide, with the concerns of metropolitan centers receiving disproportionate media attention compared to the environmental struggles of rural and agrarian communities, who are often the most directly affected. Journalists in the Global South also face unique constraints, including a lack of specialized training in science and environmental reporting, limited resources for in-depth investigative work, and intense pressure from political and corporate interests. This study contributes to this crucial body of literature by providing a deeply contextualized case study from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, examining whether these broader trends hold true at a local level and how they are interpreted by the audience. By synthesizing agenda-setting and framing theories within this specific context, this research aims to fill a critical gap: the lack of in-depth, qualitative studies that prioritize public voices to understand the effectiveness and relevance of environmental communication in a climate-vulnerable region of Pakistan.

Research Methodology

To capture the rich, subjective, and context-dependent nature of public perception, this study employed a qualitative research design rooted in an interpretivist paradigm.

Research Paradigm and Approach

The study is guided by an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and that understanding human phenomena requires interpreting the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences. This paradigm is particularly well-suited for this research, as the goal is not to produce generalizable statistics but to achieve a deep and empathetic understanding (*verstehen*) of how residents of KP make sense of their environment, the media they consume, and the relationship between the two.

Within this paradigm, a phenomenological approach was adopted. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of lived experience and the "essence" of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In this case, the phenomenon is the experience of being a media consumer and a resident of an environmentally challenged region. The methodology was designed to bracket the researcher's preconceptions and to focus on describing and interpreting the participants' own perspectives in their own words.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

A sample of **30 respondents** was recruited from across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A non-probability sampling strategy was used, combining purposive sampling with snowball sampling.

Purposive Sampling: This was the primary strategy, used to ensure maximum variation and diversity within the sample. The criteria for inclusion were designed to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives based on the assumption that experiences with the environment and media consumption patterns differ across demographics. The key criteria were:



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Geography: A balance between participants from major urban centers (Peshawar, Mardan) and those from rural or semi-rural districts with distinct ecological profiles (e.g., mountainous regions like Swat and Dir, and agrarian areas).

Profession: Inclusion of individuals from key sectors, including agriculture (farmers), business (shopkeepers, small business owners), education (teachers, professors), domestic work (homemakers), and students.

Age: Representation from three broad age cohorts: youth (18-30), middle-aged (31-50), and older adults (51+), to capture potential generational differences in perspective.

Gender: A conscious effort was made to include both male and female participants, recognizing that environmental impacts and access to information can be gendered.

Snowball Sampling: This strategy was used pragmatically, particularly in rural areas where establishing initial trust was crucial. After interviewing an initial contact (often a community elder or teacher), they were asked to recommend other individuals who might be willing to participate. This technique helped the researcher gain access to communities and build rapport more effectively.

The sample size of 30 was determined by the principle of **data saturation**. The researcher continued conducting interviews until new data no longer generated new codes or themes, and a rich and complex understanding of the core themes had been achieved.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was **in-depth, semi-structured interviews**. This format provided a flexible yet consistent framework, allowing for a conversational flow while ensuring that key research questions were addressed with each participant.

An interview guide was developed and organized around several key thematic areas: (1) personal background and connection to the local area; (2) perceptions and experiences of the local environment; (3) media consumption habits; (4) recall and perception of environmental media coverage; and (5) expressed needs and desires for environmental information. The questions were open-ended and designed to be prompts rather than interrogations (e.g., "Can you tell me about the place where you live and the environmental changes you've noticed over the years?").

A pilot test of the interview guide was conducted with three individuals not included in the final sample. This helped to refine the wording of questions, ensure they were culturally appropriate and easily understood, and improve the overall flow of the interview.

Interviews were conducted in Pashto and Urdu, the predominant local languages, to allow participants to express themselves fully and comfortably. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with explicit verbal and written consent, and was conducted in a location chosen by the participant to ensure their comfort and privacy.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English by a professional translator with expertise in both languages. The data was analyzed using the six-phase model of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), a rigorous



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and systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data.

Familiarization: This phase involved immersing the researcher in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times while listening to the original audio recordings to gain a sense of the participants' tone and emotion. Initial notes and ideas were documented in a research journal.

Generating Initial Codes: The transcripts were coded line-by-line. A code is a label that identifies a feature of the data relevant to the research question. Examples of initial codes included "garbage on street," "nostalgia for cleaner past," "TV only shows politics," "floods are God's will," and "need practical tips."

Searching for Themes: The various codes were collated and grouped into potential overarching themes. This was a messy but creative process, involving mind maps and tables to visualize how different codes could be clustered together to represent a pattern of shared meaning. For example, codes related to waste, dirty water, and factory smoke were grouped under a potential theme of "unreported local pollution."

Reviewing Themes: The potential themes were then reviewed at two levels. First, the coded extracts for each theme were reviewed to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. Second, the entire thematic map was evaluated against the full dataset to ensure it accurately captured the richness of the data. During this phase, some themes were merged, others were split, and some were discarded.

Defining and Naming Themes: This phase involved a deep analysis of each theme, writing a detailed narrative that explained its essence, its scope, and its relationship to the other themes. Final, concise, and compelling names were given to each theme.

Producing the Report: The final phase was the write-up, where the thematic narrative was woven together with compelling verbatim quotes from the participants to present a coherent and persuasive analysis, as detailed in the following section.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, several measures were taken. Credibility (the confidence in the "truth" of the findings) was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the topic and through member checking, where summaries of the findings were shared with a subset of participants to verify that their perspectives had been accurately represented. Transferability (the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts) is addressed by providing a "thick description" of the participants, the context, and the research process, allowing readers to judge the applicability to their own situations. Dependability and confirmability were bolstered by maintaining a clear audit trail, including a reflexive journal where the researcher documented methodological decisions, personal biases, and evolving interpretations of the data. This reflexive practice is crucial for acknowledging the researcher's role as an active instrument in the construction of knowledge.



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Findings: Analysis of Themes

The thematic analysis of the 30 interviews revealed a complex and often critical public perspective on environmental issues and media coverage in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Four major themes emerged from the data, each with several sub-themes, which collectively paint a picture of a public that is deeply connected to its environment but feels disconnected from the media that claims to represent its reality.

Theme 1: A Perceptual Chasm: Media Focus vs. Lived Realities

The most dominant and consistently articulated theme was a profound disconnect between the environmental issues prioritized by the media and those that participants experienced as most pressing in their daily lives. This chasm was not just about topic selection but about the very scale and temporality of the problems highlighted.

Sub-theme 1.1: The Invisible Crisis of Chronic, Localized Problems

While participants acknowledged the importance of the large-scale disasters that received media attention, their primary concerns were overwhelmingly local, chronic, and insidious. The most frequently mentioned issues were solid waste management, contaminated drinking water, and localized air pollution—problems they lived with every day but rarely saw reflected in the headlines.

"The TV channels will show a big story for two days when the floods come to Swat. Everyone will talk about it. But what about the mountain of garbage outside my street? It has been here for years. It smells, it brings diseases, it is the first thing I see every morning. This is the real disaster for us, the daily disaster. But this is not a breaking news story, so it is invisible." – Farida, 42, Homemaker, Peshawar.

"I run a small shop. The drain in front is always blocked with plastic bags and filth. The water from the tap is yellow. We have to buy expensive bottled water for our children. I see news about cutting trees in the mountains, and that is bad, yes, but who will report on our water? Who will hold the municipal committee accountable? This is a question of life and health." – Bilal, 28, Shopkeeper, Mardan.

These quotes illustrate a fundamental mismatch in what constitutes an "issue." For the media, an issue is often an event—a discrete occurrence with a clear beginning and end. For the participants, the most significant issues are conditions—ongoing, grinding problems that form the backdrop of their lives.

Sub-theme 1.2: Media's Obsession with the Episodic and Catastrophic

Participants consistently described media coverage of the environment as event-driven and focused on spectacle. The annual monsoon floods were the most cited example, a topic that receives intense, wall-to-wall coverage when it happens but disappears from the news cycle once the waters recede, with little follow-up on rehabilitation or prevention.

"When the river swells, every news van in the country is here. They show the same dramatic footage of a house falling into the water, a crying woman. It is a show. A drama. Then, after a week, they are gone. There is no story about how we rebuild, where the government funds went, or what we can do to stop it next year. The story ends with the disaster, but our struggle begins after it." – Kamran, 35, Farmer, Charsadda.



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"They love a good catastrophe. A landslide, an earthquake, a big flood. It's exciting for them. But the slow poisoning of our land from pesticides, the slow disappearance of the local birds... that is not exciting. It is a slow death, and a slow death is not news." – Professor Iqbal, 55, Academic, Swat.

This focus on episodic frames, as described by Iyengar (1991), has a significant consequence: it frames environmental problems as sudden, unpredictable accidents rather than as predictable outcomes of systemic failures in governance, planning, and environmental stewardship.

Theme 2: A Crisis of Credibility: Perceptions of Sensationalism and Bias

Flowing directly from the first theme was a deep-seated distrust of the media's motives and methods in covering environmental issues. Participants rarely viewed environmental news as a neutral public service; instead, they saw it as a product shaped by commercial pressures and political agendas.

Sub-theme 2.1: Journalism for 'Masala' (Spice)

Many respondents used the Urdu word "masala" (spice) to describe what they believed news channels were looking for: sensationalism, drama, and emotional content to attract and retain viewers. They felt that information was often secondary to entertainment.

"The news is not for information; it is for ratings. They want to make you scared, to make you emotional. They will find the one person who has lost everything and put a camera in their face. It is not about the environment; it is about selling a tragic story. It's all masala." – Rahim, 48, Engineer, Peshawar.

"They exaggerate everything. A normal rain becomes a 'dangerous weather alert.' A small fire becomes an 'inferno.' This constant hype makes you numb. After a while, you don't know what is a real crisis and what is just the media shouting." – Sana, 24, University Student, Abbottabad.

This perception of sensationalism leads to what some participants described as "crisis fatigue," where the constant high-pitched tone of news coverage leads to public desensitization and disengagement.

Sub-theme 2.2: The Political Football of Environmentalism

A significant number of participants, particularly the more educated and politically aware, believed that environmental issues were often instrumentalized for political gain. An issue would only receive coverage, they argued, if it could be used by one political party to criticize another.

"The 'Billion Tree Tsunami' project is a perfect example. If you watch a pro-government channel, it is the greatest success in history that has saved Pakistan. If you watch an opposition channel, it is a massive corruption scandal where no trees were ever planted. Where is the truth? Who can you believe? The trees are forgotten; it is just a tool in their political fight." – Professor Iqbal, 55, Academic, Swat.

"When our party was in the provincial government, the media was silent about the garbage problem in Peshawar. Now that another party is in power, suddenly it is a huge crisis on every channel. Is the garbage political? No. But the reporting is 100% political. This makes us trust no one." – A local political worker, 45, Mardan.

This framing of environmental issues through a political conflict lens undermines the potential for cross-party consensus and public mobilization. It transforms societal



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problems into partisan talking points, encouraging cynicism rather than civic engagement.

Theme 3: The Primacy of Lived Experience

When asked what shapes their environmental concerns most, participants were unequivocal: their own direct, personal, and embodied experiences were far more powerful and trustworthy than any media report.

Sub-theme 3.1: The Body as an Environmental Sensor

Participants often spoke of understanding environmental change through their own bodies. The rising heat, the difficulty in breathing polluted air, the taste of contaminated water—these sensory experiences were their most reliable data points.

"I have asthma. Ten years ago, I could walk around the city easily. Now, on many days, I cannot leave the house because the air feels heavy and full of dust. My lungs tell me the environment is getting worse, not the TV news." – Aisha, 31,

Teacher, Peshawar.

"We used to drink water directly from the stream in our village. It was sweet and cold. Now, if you drink it, you get sick. We have seen it happen. We know the water is poisoned. This is not a theory for us; it is a fact of our lives." – Gul Khan, 60, Farmer, Dir.

This embodied knowledge is deeply personal and irrefutable for the participants. It serves as a baseline against which all media claims are judged, and when the media's narrative does not align with this felt reality, the media's credibility is diminished.

Sub-theme 3.2: Generational Knowledge and Nostalgia

Older participants, in particular, framed their understanding of environmental degradation through a narrative of loss, comparing the current state of the environment to a remembered, healthier past. This intergenerational knowledge, passed down through stories, was a powerful source of their environmental ethic.

"I tell my grandchildren about the forests we had. They were so thick you couldn't see the sun. The river was so clean you could see the stones at the bottom. They look at me like I am telling a fairy tale. I saw that world, and I saw it disappear. That is a truth more powerful than any documentary." – Gul Khan, 60, Farmer, Dir.

"My mother used to say the sparrows were a sign of a healthy home. We had so many. Now, you barely see any. Where did they go? The media talks about big animals like the snow leopard. But what about the small creatures of our daily lives? Their absence tells a story." – Farida, 42, Homemaker, Peshawar.

This nostalgic framing creates a powerful emotional connection to the issue of environmental loss, grounding it in personal and cultural memory in a way that abstract media reports often fail to do.

Theme 4: A Demand for Empowering Narratives

Despite their deep cynicism about the current state of media, participants did not reject the media outright. Instead, they articulated a strong and clear desire for a different kind of environmental journalism: one that was less about problems and more about solutions, less about fear and more about empowerment.



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Sub-theme 4.1: From Problems to Possibilities: The Call for Solutions

The most consistent piece of feedback was a plea for solution-oriented or constructive journalism. Participants were tired of passive, problem-focused reporting and wanted information that could help them become active agents of change.

"Okay, we know there is a problem with plastic. We see it everywhere. Telling us for the hundredth time that plastic is bad is useless. Tell us what the alternative is. Show us a story about a village that has successfully banned plastic bags. Show us how they did it. Give us a roadmap, not just a complaint." – Sana, 24, University Student, Abbottabad.

"It is always bad news. The glaciers are melting, the floods are coming, the air is toxic. It makes you feel hopeless, like nothing can be done. Why don't they show us the good news? The people who are planting trees, the communities that are cleaning their rivers. We need stories of hope to inspire us to act." – Rahim, 48, Engineer, Peshawar.

This demonstrates a clear audience demand for reporting that moves beyond diagnosis to focus on response, innovation, and success, however small.

Sub-theme 4.2: A Desire for 'How-To' and Actionable Knowledge

Beyond inspirational stories, participants wanted practical, actionable information that they could apply in their own lives and communities. They saw a potential role for the media as a public educator, a role it was currently failing to fulfill.

"I wish a TV channel would run a simple 5-minute program every day. 'How to compost your kitchen waste.' 'How to save water at home.' 'How to test if your water is clean.' Simple things. This would be more useful than hours of politicians shouting at each other." – Aisha, 31, Teacher, Peshawar.

"Farmers need information. What crops can we grow now that the weather is changing? What are the new techniques for irrigation? The media should connect us with agricultural experts, but they are too busy with politics." – Kamran, 35, Farmer, Charsadda.

This desire for utilitarian information highlights a fundamental gap in the media market. The public is not just a passive audience to be informed about crises but an active community in need of knowledge and tools to navigate a changing world.

Discussion

The findings of this study, drawn from the rich narratives of residents of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, offer a profound critique of the current state of environmental communication in the region and provide significant insights for media theory and practice. The discussion synthesizes these findings by connecting them to the theoretical frameworks of agenda-setting and framing, and explores their broader implications.

The Limits of Agenda-Setting in an Obtrusive World

The study's findings present a significant challenge to a simplistic application of Agenda-Setting Theory. While the media may succeed in placing broad, dramatic topics like "floods" on the public agenda (first-level agenda-setting), its ability to dictate the public's hierarchy of concerns is severely limited. The reason, as predicted by Zucker (1978), is the obtrusive nature of the public's primary environmental concerns. The "perceptual chasm" identified in Theme 1 is a direct manifestation of this principle. A garbage-filled street, contaminated tap water, or polluted air are not abstract, distant issues; they are sensory, daily realities. For the participants in this study, the "lived agenda" consistently



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trumps the "media agenda."

This suggests that in contexts like KP, where environmental problems are directly and physically experienced, the media's agenda-setting power is contingent on its ability to connect with and validate these lived experiences. By focusing on unobtrusive or distant issues (like international climate policy) or only covering local issues when they reach a catastrophic, event-driven peak (like a flood), the media fails to gain traction on the chronic issues that are most salient to the public. The media is talking about the storm on the horizon while the public is concerned with the leak in their roof.

The Corrosive Effect of Political and Sensationalist Framing

The findings related to Theme 2 the crisis of credibility demonstrate the powerful real-world consequences of media framing. When the public perceives that environmental issues are consistently framed through a conflict frame (pitting one political party against another) or a sensationalist, human-interest-in-crisis frame (focusing on "masala" and tragedy), it corrodes the two most important currencies of journalism: trust and credibility.

This aligns with literature that suggests that while conflict frames may be effective at attracting audience attention, they can increase political cynicism and decrease public trust in institutions, including the media itself (Patterson, 1993). The instrumentalization of environmental issues as a "political football" strips them of their urgency and transforms them into just another part of the political game, leading to public disengagement. The perception of sensationalism further damages the media's role as a reliable informant, leading to the "crisis fatigue" mentioned by participants. If everything is framed as a catastrophe, the public eventually loses the ability to discern the true scale of different threats.

Re-centering the Experiential: A Phenomenological Perspective

Theme 3, the primacy of lived experience, underscores the importance of a phenomenological approach to understanding environmental communication. The study reveals that people's environmental consciousness is not primarily a cognitive response to media information but an embodied and emotional response to their direct surroundings. The "body as a sensor" and the power of "generational knowledge" are forms of knowing that are deeply personal and culturally embedded.

This finding suggests that media messages are not received by a tabula rasa (blank slate) audience. Instead, they are filtered through a dense web of personal history, sensory experience, and communal memory. For communication to be effective, it must acknowledge and engage with this experiential knowledge. Media frames that contradict or ignore this lived reality are likely to be rejected as inauthentic. This reinforces the need for journalists to move beyond official sources and statistics and to engage in deep listening at the community level, grounding their reporting in the tangible realities of their audience.

A Mandate for Constructive Journalism

Perhaps the most significant and hopeful finding of this study is the public's clear and articulate demand for a different kind of journalism (Theme 4). The call for solution-oriented, empowering, and practical narratives is a direct mandate for the adoption of Constructive Journalism. This emerging journalistic philosophy argues that reporting should not only expose problems but also explore solutions, that it should aim to provide a more holistic and accurate picture of the world (including successes and progress), and that it should facilitate civic engagement rather than fostering cynicism (McCollough &



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Gyldensted, 2018).

The desire of participants for stories about "what works," for "how-to" information, and for "local heroes" aligns perfectly with the core tenets of this approach. It suggests that the audience in KP is not apathetic; they are pragmatic. They are not uninterested; they are underserved. The current media diet of problem-centric, sensationalist, and politicized news leaves them feeling fearful and powerless. A shift towards constructive framing—highlighting agency, innovation, and community resilience could be a powerful strategy for media outlets to rebuild trust, increase audience engagement, and play a more meaningful role in fostering a sustainable society.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers deep insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. As a qualitative study with a sample of 30 individuals, the findings are not statistically generalizable to the entire population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The purposive and snowball sampling methods, while appropriate for achieving depth and diversity, may have unintentionally excluded certain perspectives. Furthermore, the researcher's presence and the interview process itself may have influenced participants' responses. The findings represent a rich and detailed snapshot of a particular set of perspectives, intended to generate understanding and hypotheses rather than to make universal claims.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative inquiry has ventured "beyond the headlines" to listen to the voices of the public in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. It concludes that a significant and damaging disconnect exists between the environmental realities of the people and the narratives constructed by the mass media. The public's agenda is local, chronic, and rooted in the tangible evidence of their senses and memories. The media's agenda, as perceived by this public, is too often distant, episodic, politicized, and sensational. This chasm fosters a crisis of credibility, leading a concerned and knowledgeable citizenry to rely on their own experiences while feeling frustrated and disempowered by a media ecosystem that fails to provide them with the knowledge and inspiration they need to act. However, within this frustration lies a clear opportunity. The public's demand for credible, localized, and solution-oriented journalism provides a powerful mandate for a fundamental shift in how environmental issues are reported in the region. Bridging this gap is not just a challenge for the media; it is a necessity for building a resilient and sustainable future for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following specific and actionable recommendations are proposed:

For Media Organizations and Journalists:

Adopt a "Community-First" Agenda: Newsroom editors should empower and resource district correspondents to move beyond covering official press conferences and to develop sustained, investigative stories on the chronic environmental issues identified by communities (e.g., a year-long series on a specific town's water quality).

Integrate Constructive Journalism Principles: Journalists and editors should be trained in the principles of constructive, solution-oriented reporting. This involves actively seeking out and reporting on responses to problems, not just the problems



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themselves. Every story about a problem should be followed by the question: "Who is trying to fix this, and how?"

Create Dedicated 'How-To' Content: Media outlets should create regular, practical content segments (on TV, radio, digital) that provide actionable information. This could include partnerships with local experts (scientists, agricultural officers, doctors) to deliver credible advice on topics like water conservation, waste segregation, and climate-resilient agriculture.

Depoliticize and De-sensationalize Coverage: Newsrooms must develop and enforce strong editorial guidelines that mandate evidence-based, non-partisan reporting on environmental issues. The focus should be on the societal impact of environmental problems, not on their utility as a political tool.

For Policymakers and Government Environmental Agencies:

Listen to the Public Agenda: Government policies and communication campaigns should be informed by the grassroots concerns of the public. Significant investment in addressing localized issues like waste management and clean water will likely garner more public support and trust than grand, abstract projects.

Become a Better Information Partner: Instead of relying on sporadic press releases, government agencies should proactively provide local media with a steady stream of accessible, solution-oriented data and stories about successful local initiatives, expert advice, and policy implementation.

For Civil Society, NGOs, and Educational Institutions:

Promote Media and Climate Literacy: Launch campaigns and workshops to help citizens critically analyze media messages and to use digital and social media tools to tell their own environmental stories, thereby challenging and enriching the mainstream media narrative.

Broker Connections: Act as a bridge between communities, scientific experts, and journalists. Facilitate field visits for journalists to under-reported areas and organize forums where citizens can directly engage with media professionals and policymakers.

Avenues for Future Research

This study opens up several avenues for future research. A large-scale quantitative survey could be conducted to determine the prevalence of the themes identified here across the entire province. A comparative content analysis of national versus local media coverage of the environment in KP could provide a clearer picture of the media's agenda. Finally, an ethnographic study inside a Pakistani newsroom could explore the structural, economic, and political pressures that shape the framing decisions of journalists and editors, providing a crucial production-side perspective to complement this study's reception-focused analysis.

Study Contribution

This research makes a threefold contribution. Theoretically, it refines and contextualizes the application of Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, highlighting the powerful moderating role of lived experience in a Global South context. Practically, it offers a



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clear, evidence-based roadmap for stakeholders to improve the quality and impact of environmental communication in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Socially, and most importantly, it validates and amplifies the voices of a public that is not apathetic but is deeply engaged with its environment, possessing a wealth of knowledge and a powerful desire to be part of the solution.

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