

CLIMATE AND MEDIA:

Reporting based on Conflict theory or Structural Functionalism

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Climate change represents a formidable challenge for Pakistan, a nation already confronting a plethora of political, economic and environmental issues. The escalating frequency of extreme weather phenomena, such as floods, heatwaves, and droughts, highlights the pressing need for comprehensive strategies to mitigate and adapt to climate change's impacts. In this scenario, the media and journalism play a crucial role. Effective reporting can significantly contribute to sensitising the public and policymakers, fostering climate-aware leaders, and shaping informed decision-making processes.

In this context the theoretical framework for understanding the media's role in environmental communication is rooted in the concepts of agenda-setting, framing, and the social construction of reality, alongside insights from Marx's conflict theory and modern structural functionalism.

Firstly, the agenda-setting theory posits that the media has the power to influence the public agenda by selecting the issues that receive coverage. In the context of Pakistan, this means that media can prioritise climate change as a critical issue, thereby increasing public and governmental awareness. Framing theory explains how the media presents issues, shaping the audience's perceptions and interpretations. The way climate change is framed can influence public understanding and attitudes, either by highlighting its urgency or by downplaying its significance.

The social construction of reality theory suggests that media constructs societal perceptions of reality, including environmental issues, through the dissemination of information and narratives. In Pakistan, media narratives can shape public perception of climate change, either as a distant problem or as an immediate threat requiring action.

Marx's conflict theory can be useful in understanding the power dynamics within environmental reporting. The media, often influenced by political and economic elites, might underreport or misrepresent climate change issues to serve the interests of the powerful, rather than the needs of the vulnerable populations most affected by climate change. Nevertheless, highlighting the climate injustice is a must for effective climate reporting.

Lastly, in this context modern structural functionalism, which emphasises the role of societal institutions in maintaining stability and order, can be applied to the media's role in climate change communication. From this perspective, the media serves as a crucial institution that disseminates information, educates the public, and promotes social cohesion by rallying collective action against climate change. Moreover, media also acts as a watchdog to keep a close eye on institutions developing policies for mitigation, adaptation and resilience – as well as coordination among the institutions so that they are not acting in siloes of their own. The media can choose to opt for an activist approach, the structural approach or a combination of these two.

The current state of climate change in Pakistan presents a dilemma for Pakistan. Pakistan is amongst the top ten countries most vulnerable to climate change, despite contributing less than 1% to global CO₂ emissions. In terms of methane emissions, however, Pakistan is amongst the top ten emitters. The country faces severe challenges, including water scarcity, agricultural distress, and a high frequency of natural disasters. The 2010 and 2022 floods, the 2015 heatwave in Karachi, and the ongoing desertification in Sindh and Balochistan are stark reminders of the climate crisis at Pakistan's doorstep.

In terms of the aforementioned activist approach,

Karl Marx's conflict theory comes to mind. These climate challenges can exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities, leading to conflicts over scarce resources. On the other hand, structural functionalism would suggest that addressing these challenges requires a coordinated response from all societal institutions, including the media, to maintain social stability and promote adaptation and resilience.

The media can play effective role here. One, the media serves as a bridge between scientific communities and the general public. By reporting on climate change impacts, research findings, and expert opinions, journalists can raise awareness amongst citizens and policymakers. This awareness is crucial for fostering a sense of urgency and responsibility towards adopting sustainable practices and supporting climate policies. From a theoretical perspective, raising awareness aligns with the agenda-setting function of the media and the social construction of reality. By prioritising climate change in their coverage, media outlets can shape public perception and understanding of the issue.

Second, media coverage of climate change can influence public opinion and behavior. Positive stories about renewable energy, conservation efforts, and community resilience can inspire action and encourage sustainable lifestyles. Conversely, highlighting the consequences of inaction can motivate demand for policy changes and environmental protection.

In terms of conflict theory, the media has the power to challenge the status quo by highlighting the societal impacts of climate change and advocating for policies that address the needs of the marginalised. Structural functionalism would view this as the media's role in promoting social cohesion and collective action through highlighting the importance of climate-sensitive policy making.

Third, journalists have a responsibility to hold leaders accountable for their actions or lack thereof concerning climate change. Investigative reporting can uncover negligence, corruption, or inefficiencies in government initiatives, prompting public demand for accountability and transparency.

Accountability reporting is essential in the context of conflict theory, as it exposes the power imbalances and vested interests that may hinder effective climate action. From a structural functionalism perspective, the media's watchdog role is crucial for maintaining the integrity and accountability of societal institutions.

Four, media can play a critical role in ensuring that policymakers have access to accurate and up-to-date information. By disseminating research findings and expert opinions, journalists can contribute to informed decision-making processes. This is particularly important in a country like Pakistan, where climate policies need to be based on sound science and local context. The role of media in policy decision-making reflects its function as a key institution within the framework

of modern structural functionalism. By providing a platform for informed debate and discussion, the media facilitates the development of policies that are responsive to the needs of society.

In Pakistan, the task of climate reporting is fraught with difficulties, despite its critical importance. A significant barrier is the lack of awareness and expertise amongst journalists, many of whom are ill-equipped to report accurately on the complexities of climate change. Compounding this issue is the tendency of some media outlets to prioritise sensationalism over factual accuracy, leading to the spread of misinformation and public confusion. The challenges are further exacerbated by resource constraints, as limited funding and resources hinder media organisations' ability to conduct thorough investigations or cover remote areas affected by climate change. Access to reliable information is another stumbling block, with journalists often struggling to obtain data and secure comments from government officials. Additionally, reporting on environmental issues carries inherent safety risks, particularly in regions where conflicts over natural resources are prevalent.

To effectively enhance climate reporting, it is imperative to combine the theoretical approaches of conflict theory, which emphasises the activist approach, and structural functionalism, which focuses on the institutional approach. Here are the recommendations outlined with a consideration of these theoretical frameworks:

1. **Training and Capacity Building.** Media organisations should initiate comprehensive training programs aimed at bolstering journalists' grasp of climate science and environmental reporting. This initiative aligns with structural functionalism, as it seeks to strengthen the institutional capacity of the media to disseminate accurate and informed content, thereby promoting societal equilibrium.
2. **Collaboration with Experts.** Journalists should foster partnerships with scientists, researchers, and environmental organisations to ensure the precision and depth of their reporting. This recommendation embodies the conflict theory perspective by encouraging an activist approach, where journalists actively engage with various stakeholders to challenge misinformation and advocate for environmental awareness.
3. **Diverse Storytelling.** Embracing various formats and platforms, such as documentaries, interactive web stories, and social media campaigns, can help engage a wider audience. This approach should be reflective of both Karl Marx's conflict theory through climate injustice and structural functionalism, as it leverages the diverse functions of media formats to enhance societal integration and understanding of climate issues around inequalities.

4. Focus on Solutions. Whilst it is crucial to highlight environmental challenges, reporting should also emphasise solutions, innovations, and success stories to inspire action. This recommendation aligns with both theoretical frameworks; it fosters an activist approach by motivating change and supports the institutional role of the media in providing balanced and constructive narratives.
5. Ethical Reporting. Journalists must adhere to ethical standards, avoiding sensationalism and ensuring balanced and accurate coverage. This principle is rooted in structural functionalism, emphasising the media's role in maintaining social order through responsible and credible reporting.
6. Policy Engagement. Media should actively engage with policymakers, offering a platform for dialogue and debate on climate policies and strategies. This recommendation integrates both theoretical approaches; it reflects the activist role of the media in influencing policy and the institutional function of facilitating informed decision-making and accountability.

The media and journalism play a critical role in addressing climate change in Pakistan. By raising awareness, shaping public opinion, holding leaders accountable, and facilitating informed decision-making, effective reporting can contribute significantly to the country's resilience and adaptation efforts. However, overcoming the challenges in climate reporting requires concerted efforts from media organisations, journalists, and stakeholders. Investing in training, collaboration, and ethical reporting practices will be crucial in ensuring that the media can fulfill its role as a catalyst for change in the face of the climate crisis. From a theoretical perspective, addressing these challenges requires an understanding of the power dynamics within society (conflict theory) and the strengthening of the media as a key institution (structural functionalism) to effectively communicate and address climate change issues.

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