

Six Monthly Media Monitor

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INTRODUCTION

This bi-annual media monitor report, which covers the period from May 2024 to October 2024, reviews how five English-language newspapers covered the energy sector. In keeping with tradition, we chose to monitor Dawn, Business Recorder, Express Tribune, The News and Pakistan Today to see how they covered the sector.

We examined the energy sector's key segments — coal, energy & finance, oil & gas, hydro-electricity and renewable energy. We also examined the sector's five key players and stakeholders — consumers, government, private developers, regulators and victims of energy policies.

The report is broken down by category and presents the major stories in the six-month period that occurred.

This six-month report saw the newly elected coalition government under Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif inherit an economy in crisis mode and a sword of potential default from the International Monetary Fund hanging over its head. It avoided default and barely had enough in foreign currencies to pay for a month of imports. In September the IMF approved a USD 7 billion loan to a still-cash strapped Pakistan. But the country also agreed to several measures which have been with a great deal of anger and resistance, like increasing the amount of tax it collects from people and businesses. The burden has increased on salaried classes and caused resentment against a government who, they believe, protects rich industrialists, agriculturalists and the military. Since 1958, Pakistan has taken at least 20 loans from the IMF and is its fifth largest debtor according to the BBC.

Pakistan's power crisis has faced many challenges over the decades but consumers have had to pay the price for poor delivery of service and high billing. The Benazir Bhutto government's decision in the 1990s to invite investment from independent power producers in a bid to boost electricity generation. They proved a short-term solution and they are mired in controversy. They have not solved the problem of power supply, either. Reforms in the public utility providers have not worked because of weak willed governments and their poor management practises.

According to Dawn, Pakistan has a high reliance on imported fuel and currency devaluation. Electricity generation costs account for nearly 90 per cent of total power sector revenue, they wrote in August. "Pakistan is transitioning to a wholesale electricity market, and its success hinges on private sector participation, which requires a trusted and enabling environment," writes Muhammad Sharif.

Can this government ensure such an environment?



ADDING FUEL TO FLAMES

Media coverage of the coal sector seemed to be divided into accidents – landslides, explosions, mine workers’ fatalities - and meetings held to discuss the future of coal energy or possible explorations. Little has changed since our last media monitoring of this sector as focus remains on how Thar coal has the potential to reduce energy costs, or how foreign firms want to explore power generation through gasification in Thar. For this, seminars on the topic as well as meetings about it were covered by the press.

Stories on coal accounted for 2.1 percent of the categories we covered.

This government wants to shift from imported coal to Thar coal for electricity generation so the decision to revise the total project of a Gwadar power project using imported coal was met with surprise by the press. Nasir Jamal’s story on this in August did a good job of explaining the ramifications of such a move, based on long delays caused by the pandemic and other political issues, and featured several sources. This allowed readers to understand how governments play a role in causing delays, looking out for their own interests or fulfilling reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund to reduce circular debt.

Pakistan Today’s story in July about the Federal Board of Revenue allowing 100 percent tax credit for Sindh coal

mining projects is an example of a missed opportunity as far as reporting is concerned because it did not delve deep into this incentivisation.

Once again, we see this sector has one of the most dangerous working conditions with few safety provisions in place. The media routinely includes safety concerns in stories about their deaths along with statements from ministers vowing to “do more” but there’s little follow up. The stories are never told from the miners’ perspective or their families. There’s little about mining or miners’ lives outside a purely economic lens. One such example is a small story in Dawn in August about the death of a miner who was caught in a mudslide in a coal mine in Dutki. Rescuers were able to retrieve the Afghan miner’s body and sent it to his native town but that was all. There’s more than an economic cost to workers which doesn’t get the attention it deserves.

The use of coal as fuel is a controversial topic from an environmental point of view so it was good to see The News cover a protest held in Karachi by activists calling for an end to its use. This reporting gives readers an opportunity to hear arguments from another side especially when the media focuses on coal energy as a panacea to Pakistan’s energy woes.



UNDER THE WEATHER

Climate change poses the greatest threat to humanity and while more people are realising this across the board — government, aid agencies, development sector and communities impacted by this - the media has been able to

report on this.

Despite contributing only 0.9 per cent to global greenhouse gas emissions, Pakistan ranks five in the most affected countries.

Stories about climate change accounted for 18.5 percent of total coverage of the categories we covered.

A part of the problem is that climate change is seen through a singular lens of environment or extreme weather patterns or a climate-related disaster. For example, climate change affected mango production this year due to extreme weather. According to a report in Business Recorder, this year saw significant production losses between 15 to 50 per cent decline in exports. This is devastating for a country where agriculture counts for nearly a quarter of its GDP and which is the fourth-largest mango producer. This is a story that is an economic one but also a human one that impacts farmers and their families and their futures – an aspect that did not get the coverage it deserves. Reporting doesn't take a multi-layered approach.

Op-eds on the issue demonstrated a better understanding of how climate change impacts various sectors, i.e. not just the environment but gender equality or overpopulation or how extreme weather impacts children's education. While more attention being given to the subject is welcome, it is still written following an event of climate disaster or following the publication of a report rather than consistently addressed like the issue of a poor economy or politics itself. This shows the issue isn't given the kind of importance it deserves.

If senior Supreme Court Justice Mansoor Ali Shah called for setting up a climate authority in 15 days, saying climate change was the most important issue in the country, there is no follow up on why his words did not lead to action. At the time of writing, the authority has not been set up which is a good example of how governance works, or doesn't. This is one example of how the media itself does not seem to cover stories that are not event or speech-driven. This can be evidenced from the drop in investigative stories in the English-language media press – especially in the topics this media monitor covers.

Often we find stories seem repetitive in themes: conferences or panels feature men and women across industries saying the same thing – more initiatives needed to address weather patterns or efforts needed to mitigate climate effects. News stories began to read like press releases or echoes from conferences, with little contextualisation. Very little stood out in the past six months in terms of well reported stories on climate change that haven't been said since we began monitoring the media.

This could be because journalists have not been armed with the skills to report on this important issue. Insights from a media training organised by the Global Neighbourhood for Media Innovation (GNMI) in collaboration with the United States Department of State shed light on some of the challenges. According to the report on this three-

day event in *The News*, “the training covered various aspects, including insights into environmental science, differentiating between climate and environmental issues, adopting data-driven and investigative approaches to storytelling, learning digital narrative techniques, and devising effective methods for content sharing. Practical exercises were incorporated to strengthen participants’ storytelling abilities, with particular emphasis on integrating environmental angles into their regular reporting practices.” This seemingly simple report about a media training event demonstrates how many journalists do not have the understanding and/or essential tools to report on the climate crisis. It makes the need for training media managers and editors more necessary than junior-level reporters.

A reliance on a single source isn’t restricted to government sourcing. A story in May in *The News* demonstrates this. Senior environmentalist and former chief conservator of Wildlife Malik Mumtaz Khan spoke about shrinking forest cover in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa “due to what he says are controversial strategies and policies.” While he made valid points about how the ban on forest harvesting was flouted and he saw unprecedented transportation of timber from Northern Areas to down districts, there were no other voices in the story, be it the timber mafia, or communities impacted by deforestation.

The same is true for stories wherein the government official is a single source. A story in *Express Tribune* about Punjab chief minister Maryam Nawaz discussing public transport as a way to mitigate pollution covered her statements about her plans to, for example, introduce electric buses in Lahore but did not provide any details on the timeline. Furthermore, the reported story in June did not follow up with her office about those plans.

The reliance on a single source can still inform the reader as one story on hydroponics in *The Express Tribune* in June showed. The reporter spoke with an academic about the soil-less technique which can produce crops in any season with less input but also provided a lot of information on the technique. While it falls short of including diverse voices, including from groups who may have practised the technique, it was better than solely relying on the expert.

Knowledge appears very limited on these issues.

How then is an event like World Environment Day (June 5) covered by reporters? This year, for example, newspapers marked it by either covering events or getting experts to write opinion pieces – both are important but do not go beyond the basic duties of journalism. This year’s theme was “Our Land, Our Future. We are Generation Restoration.” One paper had an opinion piece explaining the crises posed by droughts, for example while another examined the consequences of desertification and deforestation. But by and large, the day was marked from an alarmist point of view and largely failed to include the community most impacted by climate change.

Communities then are painted as groups that something is happening to - across all categories. They are not seen as stakeholders or groups that can contribute to mitigating the climate crisis, meaning government or aid agencies are

only ones with solutions.

Those impacted by the death of their livestock due to floods for example, which leads to a host of problems like food insecurity, are rarely given the newspaper space. The media then does not follow the “show, don’t tell” formula of storytelling in journalism, leaving vulnerable communities outside the conversation. It is disappointing to note that while newspapers published wire stories about initiatives from developing countries, editors did not seem inspired to tell reporters to follow leads from India, for example. This demonstrates how importance is given to politics, the economy, crime and other issues.

We found that when it came to the money allocated for the environment in the federal and provincial budgets was also sparsely reported and no follow ups were done. In a way this absolves journalists from their responsibility of holding the government to account. The Punjab government, for example, allocated 8.2 billion Pak rupees for ongoing schemes and 1.729 billion Pak rupees for new climate-related schemes in the budget for 2024-2025. There were virtually no stories analysing ongoing schemes, thereby no accountability, thereby the government becoming the strongest voice on climate change policies and schemes. A story by Shazia Hasan in Dawn, however, is one exception but she was reporting on findings of a digital news outlet. She reported on how the Sindh government has spent less than half of its allocated 48.8 billion Pak rupees in climate in the last 16 years. However, the story about the event in which this report and panel was covered.

Dawn stands out for its reporting on the impact climate change has on women. This may be because the organisation employs more women or gives women more opportunities to publish. The website’s Prism vertical has been consistent in reporting on climate change from various angles and a story by Aleezeh Fatimah in July on how heat-waves affect women’s menstrual cycle is an example of this commitment.

The problem with reporting on single sourcing is that a potential project which could provide great benefit to the community is covered purely from the government perspective. One example is the story on The Mingora Greater Water Supply and Neighborhood Park Project which according to the story, aims “to mitigate the impacts of climate change on groundwater resources, promote tourism, and significantly improve the overall health of the city’s inhabitants.” There was no other perspective, particularly the community’s to help readers understand the consequences, good or bad, of this project.

The coalition government seems to understand what is at stake and says all the right things. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, for example, in his address to the National Disaster Management Authority in June, spoke about the “serious climate challenges” the country faced, especially as the floods in 2022 caused 30 billion US dollars in losses to the economy. He recognised recovery would take many years. The government had spent 100 billion Pak rupees

on rehabilitation efforts. He spoke similar sentiments about investing in climate resilience at several national and international forums but the media rarely framed it beyond reporting on his statements. The prime minister seems inaccessible to the media so there's little opportunity for journalists to ask him questions and if there is an opportunity, questions are about a political crisis, demonstrating that the climate is not seen as a political crisis.



A WASTE OF ENERGY?

When one thinks of energy the first words that often come to mind in Pakistan are power outages or load shedding. This is followed by the hike in the price of electricity bills. This past six months was no different. At the start of our media monitoring in May, Pakistan faced a 5.5 trillion Pak rupees circular debt and 15 to 30 percent gas and electricity losses. The government had failed to keep the power sector's circular debt under the 2.31 trillion Pak rupees as promised with the IMF, despite several price hikes in electricity bills and fuel adjustments. The government also struggled to address issues like recoveries, theft, high system losses, costs in generation – all of which impact the power sector's performance. But the most impacted is the consumer, who have to pay for theft, system losses and all the subsidies the business lobby avail. This is the real tragedy.

This tragedy was reported on in stories about the impact of power outages or load shedding on students, for exam-

ple, though the primary focus in the media was on business and other industries as it tied to the economy. Most of the categories we monitored were seen through the lens of economics/finance presumably because the country's economy is in the doldrums and impacts everyone. But that was overwhelmingly the only lens the energy sector was viewed with.

Stories on energy & finance accounted for 39.8 percent of the total categories we covered.

It is understood that a hike in petroleum prices impacts everyone but the media did not successfully show what that impact looks like. There was little in terms of feature stories to help readers understand the situation from all perspectives.

While compliance to International Monetary Fund's conditions led to a release of funds in May, it also meant the government had to agree to many of their conditions regarding power tariffs. The reporting on this issue was done in a mechanical manner — statements of government representatives, utility providers with the occasional “expert” thrown in to help explain the issue, but it was usually a superficial analysis.

The same was true for reporting on the government's strategies to reduce the power tariffs. One of the steps under consideration was shutting the domestic independent power producers but according to one story in the Express Tribune in August, this could not verify it. Instead it cited “high level sources” to report that non-CPEC IPPs “were being targeted for capacity charge payments through various instruments.” This short story with anonymous sources is an example of inadequate reporting which doesn't inform the public.

The power tussle on the issue of load shedding between the KP government and centre illustrated how politics impacts deliverance of services to consumers. In June, chief minister Ali Gandapur issued ultimatums to Pesco to limit loadshedding to 12 hours, which was not in his domain to do. He and other PTI lawmakers entered grid stations over the Eid holidays and demanded the power utility reduce load shedding causing tension with the centre who wanted police to step in and take action against those who ordered restoration of power. The parties reached an understanding but the issue was a source of tension for many weeks with the media's attention on the politicians' statements and behaviour, rather than what was at the heart of the matter. This was true across all provinces and even the federation where the price of electricity was a major cause of concern with authorities from the army chief to the prime minister to provincial chief ministers weighing in on how to provide relief to the consumer.

Editorials and op-eds took the poorest and most vulnerable into account in their writing. Khurram Husain stands out as a columnist who was able to offer “the big picture” analysis in his columns for Dawn helping readers understand what was at stake. Most editorials pushed the government to reform the power sector as these could address both long-standing operational and financial challenges. The announcement of a task force in August by the prime minister, set up to address these challenges, was thus welcome by the media. In its editorial, the Express Tribune

wrote: “At the bare minimum, if the task force can come up with a workable solution to the circular debt that does not involve adding to the financial burden on consumers, it may well make national heroes out of its members.”



OF SHORTAGE & CRISIS

The media reports on the gas sector as if it is in a perpetual state of crisis. Undoubtedly, there is truth to it because shortages don't just impact households, especially in winter; they lead to factory closures and job losses and impact the economy. Then there's the endless financial uncertainty that results from massive cuts in natural gas flows. All of this is true but the voices of the victims of these energy policies remain largely absent from media reporting and as a result it is an endless loop of the same story about gas: shortage, losses, uncertainty.

Stories on gas accounted for 8.8 percent of the categories we covered.

The media monitor of the past six months was no different. Forced curtailment of gas impacted exploration and gas companies, who according to a report in *The News* in May, suffered a revenue loss of over 30 million US dollars in the last six months. The curtailment threatens to damage critical wells and could lead to permanent loss of hydrocarbon reserves. The repercussions of this could be devastating for the economy if foreign companies decide

to reconsider investment in Pakistan. This particular story demonstrated well the mismanagement issues of the energy ministry (petroleum division) by providing background and history of the functioning of various departments.

That is all the media can do - adequately and fairly report on a situation. But at times, it fell short by not providing a history or contextualisation that could make the story more urgent. For example, when reporting on the removal of 3,777 illegal gas connections in Karachi in May, the story did not explain how these connections are obtained, and the efficacy of these anti-theft drives, which are periodical and do little to address the issue at hand. The same is true for arrests of factory owners engaging in gas theft or illegal practices - what impact do they have?

Shahbaz Rana stands out for his reporting in The Express Tribune as the veteran journalist frames his stories well. One example is a story he reported in May about the Economic Coordination Committee of the cabinet approving a recovery of the 24 Pak rupees billion cost of subsidised imported gas from industrial and electricity consumers. He adequately explained the impact this would have on consumers and added details to the government perspective referencing past decisions. This is because Mr Rana is an experienced journalist who reports solely on a few beats and has earned his reputation in this domain. Unfortunately, junior reporters do not have that luxury in a newsroom under severe economic strain, short-staffed and reliant on one reporter covering several beats.

The reporting on events that could have long-term positive impact was also not properly framed. Pakistan Petroleum's discovery of gas reserves in Sindh in July, for example, only took the company's perspective. Pakistan has important natural gas reserves in Sindh and Balochistan so the discovery should have featured more voices explaining what this means, what its potential is even if the process from discovery to realisation is long.

The reliance on government officials or company representatives gives stories a feel of a press release. The absence of independent voices, providing another point of view, adds legitimacy to the government narrative. Because the reader only sees that minister or company owner's point of view, he or she accepts it as fact since there is no conflicting perspective. There is a resigned acceptance that a gas crisis is par for the course and the government's anti-theft drives are the only solution for example or the answer lies in the completion of the Iran gas pipeline.

And when the government does attempt solutions or initiatives, there is not enough scrutiny. For example, the Economic Coordination Committee in September amended the gas supply priority list by placing gas for industrial use as the first priority, alongside domestic and commercial sectors. The reporting on this in Dawn featured this as its headline and in the lede but did not offer any additional information in the remaining story which went on to report on the remaining points discussed at the meeting.

The commitment to complete the gas pipeline with Iran seems present but delays continue. Pakistan and Iran signed the agreement to construct the pipeline in 2010, but work on Pakistan's portion has been delayed due to fears of US sanctions. Once complete, the 1,180 mile pipeline will run from Iran's South Fars gas field to Pakistan's Balochistan

and Sindh provinces and was meant to supply 750 million cubic feet per day of natural gas for a period of 25 years. Pakistan said in March it would ask for a waiver from the US but there has been no follow up on whether it has done so.



IN HOT WATERS

So much seems at stake when it comes to hydro power projects yet the inordinate delays in the completion of their projects has resulted in a lot of setbacks. For example, so much seems to rest on the completion of the Dasu power project, which has suffered delays following terrorist attacks early this year. Reporting on it shifted from an energy lens to a security lens as evidenced by a story in *The News* which reported on the Deputy Inspector General of Police, Hazara range, visiting Kohistan and urging the community to support the project. He was asking residents to help “keep miscreants out” and help “support in providing fool-proof security to Chinese executing development projects in the region.” It was not enough to report on this meeting without context or history of the region or indeed. Failure to do so paints the community in a negative light, as colluders or against the dam when that may not be the case. No one from the community was quoted so they become passive recipients in the story.

Stories on hydropower accounted for 3.5 percent of the categories we covered.

This is common across sectors where communities' voices are not included in stories that impact them. There are some exceptions like a story in August in *The News* where farmers in Charsadda vowed to resist the construction of a hydropower project on irrigation canals. The story featured the voices of the organisers of this protest and addressed their concerns but did not include the perspective of the Pakhtunkhwa Energy Development Organisation.

When it came to water management practices, the media reported fairly on the government's poor handling of dams. This included the cost and time overrun for the Diamer Bhasha dam, whose cost for construction of water storage went to 1,400 billion Pak rupees from the initial assessment of 479 billion Pak rupees according to *The News*. The paper also reported in October on Indus River System Authority's forecast of a 16 percent irrigation water shortage for Sindh and Punjab in the Rabi season which extends till March. They reported on how this shortage will impact crops like wheat, tobacco, lentils and various vegetables but did not take farmers' perspective into account.

There was also coverage of the breakdown of the Neelum-Jhelum Hydropower Project in May with an editorial in *Business Recorder* saying the prime minister "will have to do a lot more than order an inquiry into the latest 'technical fault'" at the plant. The editorial reminded readers that the 969-megawatt plant had closed in 2022 due to some faults and resumed generation 13 months later. "Therefore, this time, it's not just the plant and how quickly it resumes operations that is under the microscope, but also how soon the investigation ordered by the PM sees the light of day and what subsequent actions are taken," it said.

Interestingly, this is the one category which attracted the least amount of editorials and commentary - perhaps indicating a lack of understanding on the sector. An editorial in *Pakistan Today* in October discusses water storage capacity as a critical issue. "This lack of storage capacity limits Pakistan's ability to mitigate the effects of both water shortages and flooding, particularly as climate change accelerates glacier melt," it writes. It also acknowledges that "Without urgent reform in water management and infrastructure, the country risks falling deeper into an agricultural and environmental crisis."



WHO SHALL OIL THE WHEELS?

When you think of oil, it's likely you will think of petrol prices and that may stem from how the media reports on the fluctuating prices in the world. Arguably, oil prices have the most impact across sectors, from the commuter to the richest industrialist. It's understandable as an anticipated price reduction in petrol, diesel, kerosene, and light diesel oil, can increase fuel sales and consumption and a reduction in fuel prices provides much relief to consumers.

This is the one sector where consumers found their issues taken up by the media, though in a limited capacity. For example, despite a cut in fuel prices, commuters felt frustrated that regional authorities in Rawalpindi had not reduced fares. This small story could have benefited from commuters' voices so as to understand the issue better.

Stories on oil accounted for 13.4 percent of the categories we covered.

Consumers' voices were heard when news of price hikes were published or when there were protests organised against these hikes. This was especially visible when Jamaat-i-Islami organised countrywide protests and seemed to lead a movement against administrative measures. Their rallying cry was effective in galvanising their supporters and others to come out on the streets in August.

But the media wasn't just reporting on price fluctuations, it also showed the disruptions in the oil supply chain and the impact of that. For example, in May the Oil Companies Advisory Council cautioned the Karachi Port Trust to repair the roads in Keamari oil installation area to ensure petroleum products are transported safely during monsoon. This seemingly small story in *The Express Tribune* illustrates the challenges the industry faces by authorities' lackadaisical attitude.

Express Tribune was often able to frame stories in a big picture way. For example, the oil industry in June turned to the government to address the exchange rate loss that had mounted to 26 billion Pak rupees. The Prime Minister's office had asked the petroleum division to look into the matter, adding how the reduced sales tax, which prevents the recovery of paid sales tax, resulted in Rs65 billion being held back, which impacted the cash flow, the paper reported. The story managed to fairly explain what challenges the entire industry was facing and how it was resulting in excessively high mark-up costs on the stuck funds.

Shahbaz Rana reported on a 135 billion Pak rupees petrol scam unearthed by the government in August which exposed the import of a highly inflammable and dangerous petrol adulterant, being sold as high-quality petrol. This adulterated petrol not only damaged car engines but caused significant financial losses to the treasury. Rana's was an extensive report tracing how the story was unearthed and the amount in damages it caused, making it an excellent example of reporting.

There were many missed opportunities in framing the issue so as to help readers understand the stakes involved. A report in August by the Pakistan Petroleum information Service showed a decrease in crude oil production from 94,500 barrels a day in 2015 to 70,500 barrels a day in 2024. "This was due to a notable cut in energy prices and the increased use of expensive furnace oil-run power plants to meet the surge in electricity demand during the scorching summer season" wrote the paper which seemed to be a basic analysis.

By and large, though, the media reported on the oil industry's concerns. We saw this during the budget where they rejected budgetary measures according to a story in *Dawn*. The Oil Companies Advisory Council asked the government to revive the existing taxation regime, including continuing the customs duty on diesel and sales tax laws on all petroleum products. "Reducing the duty to zero could lead to the closure of refineries, which currently supply over 60pc of the country's petroleum products," the OCAC was quoted in *Dawn* as saying. The story highlighted OCAC's concerns about the budget, like how "refineries will face significant withholding tax liabilities without corresponding income to offset it" giving readers a better understanding of the challenges from all perspectives.

However, where we needed to hear from oil marketing companies and didn't, was on accusations that they were creating artificial shortage of petroleum to earn windfall inventory gains, reported *Dawn*. Petroleum dealers turned to the government asking them to intervene. The trading of accusations is not new but as Khaleeq Kiani's report in *Dawn* in June showed, there seemed to be a pattern as described by a spokesperson of Pakistan Petroleum Dealers Association.

“Whenever there is an expected price rise in fuel prices, these companies hoard fuel supply, causing artificial shortages and undue hardship to petroleum dealers and the general public,” PPDA spokesperson Hassan Shah said.

“Despite clear orders and 100 per cent payments made in advance, these companies were not releasing fuel stock, citing excuses like ‘capping’ or offering only average fuel, stoking instability in the petroleum product market.”

This story is a good example of describing the challenges the country faces in a seemingly simple process which required transparency and fair practices but lacked in both.

What continues to be lacking is the government’s resolve to find solutions to problems like oil smuggling which costs Pakistan one billion dollars every year in terms of tax losses. Its approach to smuggling is rooted in an outdated law from the 1970s which does not reflect ground realities. It is another reminder of how policymakers’ approach to law making is as outdated as the laws.

Writing in the Express Tribune in an op-ed Muneeb Shah said “the government’s narrative that ‘oil smuggling needs to be stopped as it threatens the local economy’, is disconnected from reality.”

Shah explained how people “respond to formal and informal incentives within socio-economic constraints. Not to forget, importing petroleum products significantly burdens Pakistan’s fragile economy, as these products account for over 30 per cent of the country’s import bill.”

Lastly he offers a different approach: “policies on oil smuggling should focus on transnational people-to-people relations, with locals as main stakeholders.”

This oped illustrates how effective opinion writing can be in explaining the root of the problem.



NOTHING TO SEE HERE

This year's budget saw some concessions for energy-related matters. The finance minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, in his budget speech, announced zero import duty on raw materials for solar panels, inverters and allied equipment. The finance minister also mentioned that the government hoped to reduce the reliance on imports of solar panels, save foreign exchange, fulfil local requirements, and export panels as well.

However, reporting in Business Recorder, Bilal Hussain wrote that removal of custom duties and taxes will not be enough to entice companies to come and establish plants to produce solar panels in Pakistan. "Instead, a more holistic approach is needed to incentivise industries through ensuring stable and certain demand for PV through consistent policies," he wrote.

Hussain's story offered more analysis than others on the budget. He said the allocation of 4 billion Pak rupees for e-bikes "is also insufficient to adequately address the reduction of emissions from the transport sector, which is a crucial aspect of achieving the 2030 climate change mitigation goals."

Aurangzeb also said the government had allocated 7.7 percent of the Running of Civil Government and 15.3 percent of Public Sector Development Programme funds for climate-sensitive areas to tackle climate change in the fiscal year 2024-2025, as Dawn reported. He also said "green budgeting will allow the government to prioritise climate by integrating it into the budgeting process and fixing responsibility for implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting across line ministries and departments." But this report did not delve deep into the mechanisms around this, demonstrating the limitations reporters face when covering this subject.

Stories on renewable energy accounted for 13.9 percent of the categories we covered.

When it came to matters of renewable energy, the media reported on new schemes and initiatives or e-vehicle launches as events. Whether it was news about Thatta Cement announcing plans in May to install 8.3 megawatts of renewable energy on its premises or announcing a joint venture between two companies on production of electric vehicles, time and again we see reporters focusing on the event, rather than explaining how this impacts other stakeholders.

The lack of understanding on the net metering issue also demonstrated the poor training of journalists in the newsrooms. In June, rumours the government may end the net metering policy, which circulated on TV channels, caused a lot of panic among consumers. Despite the power division issuing a statement saying there was no such truth to the rumours, many in the media ran with the story and the possible consequences until that clarification was issued. This highlighted how electronic media still holds the power to set the editorial agenda.

But in this category, there was a greater understanding in the media of how important renewable energy was for Pakistan. The News' Sher Ali Khalti reported on how consumers in Lahore want to shift to solar but faced challenges in securing net-metering. This was a multi-sourced story which included voices from consumers to solar energy providers and a Lesco representative.

A multi-perspective story allows for a deeper understanding than reading another story in The News about K-Electric receiving bids for the country's first 220 MW hybrid wind/solar project in Dhabeji (Sindh) in September, which was single-sourced.

Op-eds, on the other hand, allow for writers to highlight the urgency or offer advice to authorities and there was plenty on display for renewable energy, demanding the government invest in it. But there was also caution as demonstrated by Tanzeel Khanzada in his opinion piece for Pakistan Today in September who said the rapid shift to solarisation could damage the energy ecosystem. "The obsession with solar energy may be diverting crucial attention and resources from the very real, systemic problems plaguing the national grid, increasing dependency on unreliable infrastructure and exacerbating existing issues in the distribution and transmission of electricity," he writes. He also reminds that the push to solarisation was "reminiscent of Pakistan's hasty moves towards hydropower in the past. Hydroelectric projects were once touted as the ultimate solution to Pakistan's energy deficit, yet many of those projects now suffer from environmental degradation, financial mismanagement, and a lack of long-term planning." This piece, like several others that focused on energy policies, offered a holistic approach to the country's needs.



THE SOURCES THAT CREATE THE STORIES

It should not surprise that the government remains the most quoted source in the media stories leaving all others behind by a significant margin. Government officials topped the list as most quoted sources at 62.8 percent followed by independent experts at 9.9 percent, then people associated with energy at 8.5 percent. Politicians and elected representatives were neck to neck with academics and researchers at 5 percent and 5.32 percent respectively. Unknown sources came in after with 3.1 percent of sources followed by international financial institutes at 2.9 percent while civil society came at 1.8 percent.

This tells us the value and importance given to sourcing but it also tells us about the state of the media itself. Government sources are likely to be the most accessible and are also at the forefront of disseminating information themselves, be it with press conferences, press releases or using social media to get their point of view across. While politicians and elected representatives also enjoy accessibility, it is telling that their voices were not included in matters of energy. They tend to dominate the airwaves at prime time discussing politics meaning issues like power generation are not viewed through a hot topic lens. The media would rather turn to independent experts, which is a good thing for ensuring a better framing, but in this case that reliance was less than 10 per cent of sourcing.

A reliance on unknown sources, even if small as a percentage, remains a cause for concern. Their motivation to hide behind anonymity is never known and cannot be trusted so one can't substantiate the veracity of their claims.



RECORDING THEIR STORIES

When it came to the type of stories, it was disappointing to see the near absence of investigative stories done in this six-month period. We recorded 17 in total. This speaks volumes for staffing issues at papers across the country as a majority was devoted to producing news reports as evidenced by the 85.5 percent figure devoted to this sector. There were negligible features, once a hallmark of newspapers were reduced to four in The News, three in Business Recorder, two each in Pakistan today and The News and one in Dawn. Op-eds formed 7.7 percent of the total, but it was disappointing to read that editorials were only 2.3 percent of the total, as most newspapers employ full time staff to write their editorials. This shows that politics i.e governance was written about most. Letters came in at 3.3 percent probably reflecting the frustrations of readers most impacted by energy policies.

The sectors that received the most stories were energy and finance at 39.8 per cent. This is easy to understand given this impacted people across sectors and incomes. Climate change was the second most featured beat at 18.5 percent which shows there is some understanding of the urgency of this segment. Renewable energy and oil came third and fourth at 13.9 per cent and 13.4 per cent, respectively. Gas stood at 8.8 per cent. Stories about the hydro power sector constituted 3.5 percent while coal came at the bottom with 2.1 per cent.

CONCLUSION

Once again, a trend continues in how little this sector is understood by the media as well as the reliance on government officials for sourcing. It is likely due to a newsroom stretched to the max with little sources and almost no resources to spend on training staff. There is little pushback on what the government says in terms of harder questions or looking for another perspective. This harms the newspaper audience which becomes ill equipped to make informed decisions or, worse, turns to social media for more information. Social media is a cesspool for misinformation where audiences are stuck in silos hearing only one perspective, usually one that confirms their point of view.

This spells disaster for a country wanting to move to a democratic form of government. For any effective democracy to function, it needs an independent press that arms its citizens with information needed to make sound judgments come voting time. The energy sector thus needs better skilled reporters and journalists who can frame these important issues in a manner that allows people to make better decisions about their futures.