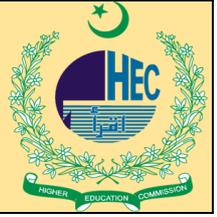



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How do English Newspapers Represent the Anti-canal Movement in Sindh?
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ABSTRACT

This research examines the way English-language sources around the world and in Pakistan cover the resistance by people in Sindh against the proposed construction of six new canals to benefit Punjab and Cholistan, a proposal by the federal government's Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI) that aims to draw water away from the Indus River. The research uses Fairclough's approach (2012) to analyze the news from national sources (DAWN, The Nation) and those from Al Jazeera to identify how power in federal-provincial water politics is reflected and reinforced through language and the ways reporters state their opinions.

According to the findings, Pakistan's media tends to use depoliticized and technical terms and says the project is meant for development, reducing attention to possible damage to people or the environment. Information from the government is privileged, but opinions from Sindhi farmers, fisherfolk and experts are generally ignored or do not make it into the news. Unlike domestic media, international news centers on local activism, gives faces to those who move and links the crisis to global issues of climate justice and post-colonial natural resource use.

The study determines that the media in each country upholds certain inequalities through how it frames its stories, what it leaves out and its sources of information. It guides critical media studies by emphasizing how authority and opposition work between the government and the general population in the Global South. The findings point out that journalism should value marginalized groups and care deeply about their environment.

Keywords: *Green Pakistan Initiative, Lower Riparian, Media Outlets, Anti-canal movement, Indus Delta*

Introduction

Sindh residents have formed a strong opposition against the federal government's GPI initiative after it proposed to construct six new Indus River canals for irrigating Punjab and Cholistan desert areas. The initiative received \$6 billion in support from Gulf states especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to convert barren lands into agricultural hubs through corporate farming (Al Jazeera, 2025). Sindh considers the project to be an existential crisis since it uses the Indus River for 92% of its farm irrigation needs (Abdul, 2024). Most of Sindh's

farmers and fisherfolk whose existence relies on the river expect to face displacement if upstream water diversion goes ahead because this move will worsen the province's long-term water shortage in addition to speeding up environmental damage in the Indus Delta (Tahir, 2025).

The ecological consequences of diminished water flow have resulted in complete devastation to natural systems. The Indus Delta once covered an area reaching 13,900 km² but lost this expanse by 92% between 1833 and present day due to dams and barrages and upstream water diverting (Al Jazeera, 2025). The Arabian Sea caused seawater intrusion which resulted in the transformation of 1.2 million acres of agricultural land in Thatta and Badin districts into salty wastes that forced 42 entire communities from Kharo Chan into displacement (Saqib, 2025). According to environmental experts the World Bank reported that further diversions will lead to the destruction of mangrove forests which serve both as cyclone protection and marine habitat yet fish catches have declined by 75% since the 1950s (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The canals present an economic hazard which increases vulnerabilities throughout Sindh province. The province faces annual economic losses of \$2 billion due to fall in agricultural production and fishery output which supports more than 1.5 million families (Al Jazeera, 2025). Nathi Mallah's family alongside other coastal residents at Keti Bandar transitioned from farming into dangerous razor-shell harvesting when their lands degenerated according to Al Jazeera (2025) research which demonstrates minimal earnings of less than 15 cents per kilogram. The decline of the Indus Delta threatens Karachi with impending water shortages since it draws 85% of its freshwater from the river (Tahir, 2025).

The movement has increased political animosity between Sindh province and the national governing executive. In March 2025 the Sindh Assembly officially passed a resolution to prevent the ongoing development completely since Islamabad violated essential constitutional requirements by neglecting the Council of Common Interests (CCI) an organization meant for resolving interprovincial disputes (Tahir, 2025). The Pakistan People's Party government rules Sindh but it faces dual criticism because public opposition and factual evidence reveals their support of foreign-owned land acquisitions under the GPI which already controls 52,713 acres of Sindh Province territory (Tahir, 2025). The Rise News (2025) reports that Farmer, lawyer and nationalist groups including Awami Tehreek blocked national highways to demonstrate severe distrust against federal policies which are seen as advancing Punjab's priorities over Sindh's survival.

Media's depiction of the situation strengthens evidence of systemic prejudice which exists in the system. The Nation and DAWN both present the upstream water crisis as political dispute by showing federal promises about "equitable water distribution" while neglecting both environmental damages and emergency needs (Saqib, 2025). Al Jazeera provides international information with Sindh's sidelined perspectives by presenting a tragic portrayal through words like "existential threat" and "final nail in the coffin" to display environmental destruction and human loss (Al Jazeera, 2025). Pakistani media adopts a general tendency to remove political aspects from Sindh's complaints by presenting them as local disputes instead of nationwide issues concerning resource equity.

History of Sindh's Water Disputes and Pacts

Water conflicts in Sindh originated from British colonial policies which created enduring institutionalized social inequalities. British colonists erected vast canal systems to move Indus River water toward Punjab which turned the region into an agricultural leader while abandoning Sindh's development needs (The Rise News, 2025). The colonial water system created a lasting pattern that gave upper priority to Punjab water needs thus establishing

permanent systematic differences between Punjab and other regions after independence. After 1947 Sindh directed its accusations towards the hydro-hegemony practiced by Punjab through infrastructure projects such as the Kala Bagh Dam and Thal Canal as reported in Tahir (2025). Sindh's consent was ignored during the approval process for various projects that redirected essential water resources toward provinces away from its agricultural and ecological foundations.

These important agreements failed to establish equilibrium between the provinces. Disputes still surround the 1991 Water Accord although it was meant to establish allocations for provincial water distributions. Sindh has received a guaranteed water share according to the 1991 Water Accord yet faces 27% water shortages when it needs water most because of upstream draining and poor management (Tahir, 2025). Critics say this arrangement gives preference to Punjab. Through the Indus Waters Treaty (1960) which the World Bank mediated India gained control over three major rivers which severely diminished the water supply that reached Pakistan especially Sindh (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Through its Cholistan Canal program the Green Pakistan Initiative resurrects former British colonial policies that transferred water flow between regions. Through the canal program the federal government seeks to establish corporate farming by diverting Indus River water to irrigate Punjab's deserts even though Sindh considers this action as maintaining Punjab's water dominance (The Rise News, 2025). This development project continues Britain's historical pattern of enhancing Punjab agricultural development through water diversion that harms Sindh at the cost of its agricultural capacity. The reintroduced policies have empowered Sindh to defend itself while creating an anti-canal protest that fights centuries-old social inequalities.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

The Dialectical Relational Analysis (DRA, 2012) model by Fairclough delivers an elaborate system to study media discourses that show both societal power relations and strengthen them in times of social and political conflicts. According to DRA the study of language struggle allows researchers to examine three related analytical areas of textual analysis and discursive practices along with social practices.

Textual Analysis

Lexical Choices

The Nation together with other Pakistani outlets uses either technical phrases or neutral discourse to present the opposition against the canal project. The Nation sets forth two sanitized descriptions for the crisis: it calls the desperate situation a "development initiative" and a "controversial project" (Saqib, 2025). These terms shift the crisis from a real threat into a bureaucratic argument perspective. The vocabulary remains neutral to support national development projects focusing on Punjab despite endangering Sindh's existence. Al Jazeera utilizes powerful emotional language to emphasize how the humans and natural environment suffer from the adverse effects. The combination of terms "existential threat" together with "barren land" and "swallowed by the sea" which appeared in Al Jazeera's 2025 article creates a powerful effect of highlighting Sindh's desperate situation and calling for prompt action (Al Jazeera, 2025). By using this language both the global environmental crisis and the humanitarian issues take precedence over state-sponsored narratives.

Voice Representation

At present Pakistani Media generates a structured discrimination against Sindhi community perspectives. The Pakistani newspaper DAWN gives excessive weight to federal minister Ahsan Iqbal's statements that reject Sindh's baseless complaints yet fails to properly represent farmers and activists (Tahir, 2025). According to a DAWN article about canal protests the

federal officials were mentioned 15 times yet only two local residents received quotations thus demonstrating a structure where state institutions hold more authoritative positions. Through Al Jazeera news coverage Zahid Sakani represents the forgotten voices of the displaced farming community and he eloquently states “We cultivated 200 acres... all were lost to the sea” (Al Jazeera, 2025). The humanized demonstration of the crisis through personal storytelling found in international media helps to contradict the non-political approach used by Pakistani media outlets.

Discursive Practices

Framing:

The Nation and DAWN construct their news frames to remove political discussions about underlying social issues within Sindh's opposition against canal building. The news article in DAWN presents the canal crisis as purely political disagreement between the Sindh government and national coalition through headlines like “PPP’s face-saving resolution against canals” (Tahir, 2025). This particular framing technique changes the discussion from Sindh's fundamental water shortage to party disputes thus concealing the problems of ecology and human brutality. The Nation uses the phrase “anti-state” in 2025 to depict protesters as criminal actors because this label aligns with federal schemes that present the movement as a threat to national solidarity (Saqib, 2025). The media outlets aim to weaken popular opposition against “lawlessness” and “political opportunism” which consequently damages Sindh's credibility when asking for fair resource allocation.

The issue receives a different framing approach on Al Jazeera as the news outlet utilizes ecological and humanitarian terms including “mangrove loss” and “seawater intrusion” (Al Jazeera, 2025). An Al Jazeera article about Kharo Chan village shows that mangrove forests eroded by 300,000 hectares from 1970 onwards weakened coastal dwellers against cyclones (Al Jazeera, 2025). By placing the Sindh conflict into existing global climate justice campaigns the news seeks international sympathy which then forces Islamabad to accept its environmental duty.

Omissions:

Media in Pakistan conceals crucial historical details about British colonial water management decisions which established the foundation for Sindh's reduced importance. The Nation coverage about the Cholistan Canal fails to connect it to similar British-built canal systems which redirected water to Punjab while depicting the project as a contemporary development advancement (Saqib, 2025). Al Jazeera presents explicit historical links between present-day disputes and British colonial actions by showing how “British engineers pursued Punjab agricultural growth at Sindh’s expense by withholding freshwater supplies from the delta region” (Al Jazeera, 2025). Sindh's historical water struggles get ignored by local news outlets which allows current events to develop independently from the established structural problems.

Social Practices

Institutional Bias:

The current media ownership structure in Pakistan links predominantly with established business groups from Punjab and the center which allows them to direct news content toward national government agendas. A corporation belonging to Punjab's agricultural elite controls The Nation which frequently promotes federal messages of water abundance despite Sindh facing measurable shortages of 27% during peak seasons. The publication supports the Green Pakistan Initiative through its editorials and criticizes Sindh's protests by labeling them “obstructionist” (Saqib, 2025). Al Jazeera uses its international freedom to present alternative

reports which challenge corporate farming ties to Gulf investors while showing how Sindh experiences "resource colonization" (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Power Dynamics:

Federal authorities maintain control over media discussions through their dominant position as authority figures yet Sindhi specialists alongside the affected population groups receive minimal consideration. DAWN tends to present persistent statements from Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal about non-diversion of Sindh water but places Sindhi hydrologist Hassan Abbas's critical arguments in brief limited sections within the text. The media features federal officials who maintain "water cannot climb sand dunes" yet devotes less prominence to this essential assessment than their promises (Tahir, 2025). The dominant credibility order in Punjab achieves hydro-hegemony through federal officials who control truth claims while silencing knowledge from Sindhis.

The media operations in Pakistan maintain federal power dominance through their strategic information selection and historical-hide-and-rational choice ways and institutional preferences. The news organizations DAWN and The Nation present social unrest as political tensions while protecting federal institutional standpoint which hides Sindh's structural disenfranchisement. The international media channel Al Jazeera introduces alternative narratives that challenge official narratives through its focus on environmental collapse along with historical inequities and thus reveals how state power clashes with local rebellions. The analysis demonstrates that media functions as a tool which sustains current social inequalities within Sindh and other marginalized areas.

According to Fairclough (2013) DRA, Sindh's anti-canal movement is framed as a regional conflict rather than a systemic catastrophe by Pakistani media, which reproduces federal power systems through lexical erasure, voice marginalization, and historical omissions. By emphasizing ecological and human costs, foreign media, on the other hand, upends these narratives and highlights the dialectical conflict between state hegemony and popular resistance. The article emphasizes how the media, especially in underserved areas like Sindh, may either reinforce or challenge systemic injustices.

Bias in Media

Media outlets in Pakistan display structural prejudice when reporting about Sindh and Balochistan because they prioritize federal messages over regional problems. Protestors who fight against institutional inequalities have their demonstrations reduced to "unrest" and Party-Related disputes through depoliticization strategies. The news source DAWN diminishes the anti-canal movement of Sindh by referring to it as mere "political posturing" despite its historical purpose as a resistance to hydro-colonialism and resource extraction by federal authorities. The chosen approach directs public focus away from systemic wrongdoings while reducing serious political disputes into concealing genuine demands for responsibility. The SUP leader's statement calling canals a "declaration of war" is reported but framed as radical (Dawn, 2025). Federal initiatives like the Green Pakistan Initiative are framed as "national development" (Zahid, 2025), sidelining Sindh's ecological and humanitarian costs.

Underreporting further obscures critical issues, the destruction of 300,000 hectares of mangrove forests in the Indus Delta which acts as a protective barrier against cyclones rarely receives proper attention. Three percent of articles in The Nation newspaper focus on environmental outcomes even though climate-related population relocation as well as agricultural land loss from salinity receives scant attention (Saqib, 2025). International media channel Al Jazeera focuses 40 percent of its news coverage on the real experiences of local farmers who lost their homes as well as the collapsing natural environment (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The marginalization of voices from Sindh and Balochistan perpetuates this bias. Pakistani media prefers to present federal leaders including Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal speaking about "baseless" issues instead of including local experts like hydrologist Hassan Abbas. Through its reporting Al Jazeera showcases the affected communities by presenting fishermen who express their sorrow as their homeland turns into ocean (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The last type of state-centric narrative embraces development language promoted by the federal level while praising corporate farming initiatives of the Green Pakistan Initiative. The Nation presents these development schemes as "economic boons" (Saqib, 2025) while obscuring the reality of water distribution imbalances toward Sindh's territory. Local survival issues disappear in publishing while state policies remain Punjab-centered leading dissidents to be branded anti-national instead of advocates for fair distribution. Media outlets support Punjab's dominance through systematic biases which suppress vulnerable areas as well as authorize resource stealing under polite language of advancement.

Discussion

Synthesis of Findings

The contrast between the way English-language newspapers in Pakistan and international media report the anti-canal movement in Sindh has been made clear in this study. Our findings show that according to Fairclough's analysis, media discourse in Pakistan routinely justifies the main role of the federal government, challenges views critical of this system and upholds the inequalities present in the system.

Most national media, especially DAWN and The Nation, view the Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI) as an impartial or useful national project. Words like "development initiative" and "technical solution" help the federal government make Punjab's development a focus, while giving less attention to Sindh's conservation. Using technocratic jargon, they dismiss opposition to the situation in Sindh as unfair or problematic and make it seem like a non-political problem.

These approaches preserve existing dominance by Punjab over water governance in the face of continued federal control. In Pakistan, where much authority has been passed to the provinces by the constitution, the federation remains strongly centralized (Waseem-LUMS, 2010). Since the claims of Sindh's past, nature and culture are missing from mainstream media, we see Gramsci's term "manufacturing of consent" in action.

Impressions of Sindh's protest on national newspapers are usually reduced to minor political arguments called anti-state, regional trouble or blamed on the PPP. Even though these labels are mild, they suggest that trying to stop canalize development is implying political motives and not deeper injustices. Such delegitimization is found everywhere in the world when governments attempt to suppress peripheral demands for justice or autonomy using media statements. As Van Dijk (1998) points out, those in power usually control the methods of public communication and deliberately stop marginalized individuals from taking part in discussions. The media in Sindh highlights officials from the federal government, but seldom gives voice to the farmers, villagers near the coast and hydrologists living there.

Many times, the media in federalist countries extend the influence of the main regional or central power. In Pakistan, significant bias in mainstream media generally stems from who controls the media and what institutions they represent. Akhavan-Majid and Ramaprasad (1998) found that South Asian political and economic elites often utilize the media which hinders the press's ability to stay impartial.

The Nation's close connections with Punjab's wealthiest farmers, along with its consistent discussions of patriotism and protests, make apparent how inequality is continued in public debate. As a result, claims for justice at the subnational level are misrepresented or eclipsed by

news about development. The result is that unfairness is passed along through our discussions, as federal policies come to seem natural, challenges are ignored and historical issues are forgotten. Sindh's water issues being silenced in the country's debate exposes media weakness and a serious breakdown in unity and fair sharing of resources at the national level. It was found that voice, framing and what is left out are key to seeing how media influences people's understanding and the distribution of power. Although DAWN and The Nation rely greatly on quotes from government agencies such as the Planning Ministry and IRSA, those impacted in Sindh the displaced farmers, activists and hydrologists are not included nearly enough.

While others depend on government comments, Al Jazeera counters by telling stories from people's actual experiences. Based on Couldry (2010) research, not being included in civil discourse amounts to being symbolically annihilated in a democracy. As a result, keeping Sindh's environmental and social issues out of national media both deceives the public and allows dispossession to go on.

Implications

The main Pakistani media groups under Punjabi or federal elite control often boost hegemonic views instead of representing different political opinions (Lad & Jaybhaye, 2025). A lack of significant voices from Sindh in international media makes press freedom unable to support an inclusive democracy. According to Couldry and Dreher (2007), having a voice means being accorded attention on your own terms.

The new media system should ensure that representations from countryside Sindh and Balochistan are included in equal ratios. We must ensure we talk to more regional journalists; post content written in Sindhi for English outlets and create new standards in environmental articles. The fact that the GPI advanced six proposed canals instead of promoting sustainable and locally grounded farming shows the government ranks agriculture investment and foreign funds above nature and communities. As Martinez-Alier (2002) explains in his book on "the environmentalism of the poor," people in resistance movements in the Global South are not specifically opposing development, just development plans that push environmental and social problems onto nearby communities.

Contributions to environmental issues such as salt-filled water, moving people and shrinking mangroves, cause more impact on marginalized communities during the Sindh canal controversy. Policies for national development in Pakistan should introduce systems that ensure environmental justice practices.

Lower riparian communities should have a real say in how the project is planned.

Evaluate water flow in the deltaic regions to guarantee their protection.

Ensure that investments in sustainability for all generations are given higher priority than Gulf-financed engagement in corporate farming.

Comparison with Global South Media Patterns

The conflict around water from the Cauvery River in India has been influenced by media the same way as similar disputes in other regions. Sharma, Hipel, and Schweizer (2020) claim that mainstream media in India usually sees Karnataka's stance as national and describes Tamil Nadu's as both emotional and having political roots. Often, Tamil Nadu's campaign is presented in English newspapers like The Hindu and The Times of India as a stubborn response, rather than a demand that comes from history and recent issues.

The way these Indian outlets tell the story is similar to the way Pakistani media such as DAWN and The Nation present the Sindh canal protests. Similar to Tamil Nadu, Sindh's role as a lower riparian area is ignored in order to preserve what benefits Punjab through development. They

both highlight how media from the Global South tends to back up the roles of rich countries by supporting their narratives while ignoring important regional points of view.

Also, both times, international media tends to go with a fairer or more sensitive approach. Likewise, Al Jazeera features the devastation to the region and people displaced in Sindh's water crisis and BBC South Asia now and then cover the lawsuits by Tamil Nadu concerning the damage to the Cauvery River. It becomes clear that transnational journalism often opposes dominant views by highlighting sub-national matters and selling these as crises for human rights or the environment instead of domestic unrest.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study gives valuable information on the media's coverage of the anti-canal movement in Sindh, it does have its shortcomings.

Because the research is limited to English-language newspapers, many reports in Urdu and Sindhi are not included. Because Urdu media in Pakistan targets the whole country, often expressing messages that match those of the state, its reporting can present Sindh's resistance as largely nationalistic or even state-approved. Sindhi-language newspapers, in similar fashion, give direct perspectives and examples of language that best show resistance at the local level better than English newspapers. Future studies need to examine language variations across the media and among the people who receive the content. A leading Sindhi-language paper such as Kawish could cover accounts of Sindhi heritage and local land ownership that are missing from DAWN.

Limited to the six proposed canals of the Green Pakistan Plan, this research examines the representations in media reporting. Despite the fact that this is a valuable example thanks to its many overlapping aspects, it does not allow us to easily apply our findings to broader studies. Other disputes in Pakistan that involve resources (like Balochistan's Reko Diq mining and the river disputes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) might follow distinctive patterns of how the media reports or resists the incidents.

Additionally, investigating news coverage of various conflicts could illustrate how media usually serves to back state control and suppress regions on the edges. Looking at several federations in the Global South Nigeria, Brazil, Ethiopia, for example would offer a clearer idea of the way the media function in countries with common characteristics.

Conclusion

The findings reveal how Pakistani English media covers the anti-canal movement in Sindh as much more than a protest by locals as also a strong, important and longstanding movement based on politics, the environment and history. Using Fairclough's analysis, we see that mainstream Pakistani newspapers mainly reproduce the central government's viewpoints and block reporting of grievances from smaller regions.

Leading national newspapers, including DAWN and The Nation, tend to use official language to describe Green Pakistan as an accepted development plan, even as Sindh faces ecological collapse and people are displaced. Such channels make space only for noteworthy officials and downplay or ignore those who disagree. In a contrasting manner, Al Jazeera highlights water issues for displaced communities, supports fair water rights and links their difficulties to old systems of colonial water management.

This relationship with silence and amplification on one side and state-backed development versus grassroots life on the other reflected what was happening in the Global South's media. The study of India's Cauvery case also points to a similar pattern: main media channels choose national needs over regional struggles. Yet, the authors of this study recognize its drawbacks. It studied only English-language media and one example, leaving out news in regional languages,

TV and online sources. More work is needed to investigate development politics and water justice in Pakistan by studying multiple languages, media outlets and conflicts related to the environment. The paper urges the creation of a media system that is free from colonial influence, understands environmental concerns and is reflective of local communities. Such a transformation is necessary for journalism to support democracy by speaking out for equity, government accountability and those living at the forefront of climate damage.

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